

THE FRIENDS QUARTERLY

# The Future of Quakerism in Britain Yearly Meeting

## Felicity Kaal

### *Introduction*

The future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain is bright. There is a great deal of spiritual hunger in our society with little suitable to feed on. Quakers are ideally placed to provide wholesome nourishment.

We live in a time of rapid change. If our religions do not provide explanations, meaning, guidance and hope that resonate with people, then they are rejected and ignored, and people look elsewhere. Consumerism and fundamentalism feed the wrong things and ultimately do not satisfy. Atheism and scientific materialism feed only one side of us while the inner world remains starved.

Some say we are moving into a second period of major religious change<sup>i</sup> when radical shifts in religions will emerge. Quakers are in a good position to help people through the wilderness/wasteland/desolation of a society with no spiritual anchor, because with the birth of Liberal Quakerism we started building a bridge across from the pre-modern to the postmodern worldview.

With the shift to Liberal Quakerism at the beginning of the 20th century Quakers accepted modernism. Now we need to include postmodernism (for the purposes of this essay defined as the post 1960s culture and birth of the technological age). The last 50 years have seen great changes and set us new challenges. Either we embrace the postmodern age or become obsolete and eventually fade away and die.

### *At present we face three possible future directions:*

- at one extreme is the push to drop the 'religious' in our title and drift towards becoming another humanist activist organisation. We already accept atheists into membership and members are criticised for using language that is 'too Christian' – too liberal.
- at the other extreme is the call to return to an exclusively Christian Society with the traditional concept of God – too conservative.

## THE FUTURE OF QUAKERISM

- The middle way is to adapt without losing our distinctive Quaker identity.

I opt for the last option and in this essay I intend to explore:

- what we need to retain as our core Quaker identity
- what we need to retrieve that has become diluted
- what we need to change or introduce and their consequences.

and to do that from three perspectives:

- the inward path – discernment, experience, God, practice
- our corporate body – structures, roles & responsibilities, membership
- the outward path – activism, how we behave in the world, testimonies

\*\*\*

### *Background*

I was born, I will die, the sky is above me, the earth is beneath me.  
Everything else changes.

As conscious beings we are aware we are alive and how precarious our existence is, and if we think too much about it it's terrifying. So we seek help. We need explanations and guidance. We want explanatory stories that tell us where we've come from, where we're going to and why we are here. They don't have to be literally true, but they must resonate at some level of our being. We want guidance on how to behave, how to deal with our emotions and experiences in the world. We want explanations that make sense of different states of consciousness that we experience, like dreams and peak numinous moments. We want to relieve our existential angst and to satisfy our often-inexplicable longings.

This is why every culture creates a religion. As cultures change, their religion changes. If the religion does not evolve with the people, it will be discarded and a new religion adopted to fulfil the needs of the time. A religion emerges that will provide explanations and guidance relevant to the contemporary understanding of the world. So a time of rapid societal change, of knowledge and understanding of the physical world and of the means of production, will trigger cultural and structural changes in

## THE FRIENDS QUARTERLY

society, and this will include a time of religious turmoil. As was the case in 17th century, and as is the case now. There have been immense changes in the last hundred years and the rate of change is increasing with this century.

We have moved from a homogenous modern, industrialised society to a multi-cultural, pluralistic, postmodern, computerised society, with different work practices, lifestyles, gender roles, attitudes, beliefs, world views and so on. Accompanying this is a huge drop in church attendance and a rise in secularism, in atheism, in fundamentalism, in new religions often known as spiritualities and a spread of religions from other countries. All the world's religious traditions, practices and teachings are now available to us.

Quakers shift to Liberal Quakerism at the beginning of the 20th century anticipated and pre-empted these changes.

For early Quakers, belief in God, Christ and the teachings from the Bible were givens, taken for granted. They provided the explanatory stories, language, concepts and metaphors. It was the guidance from the church, the church's authority, that early Quakers challenged. They believed there was that of God in everyone; an individual did not need an intermediary because they could have a direct experience of the Divine. If you opened yourself to the Inward Light it would teach you directly; first by revealing your darkness, which would transform you, and then by guiding you in how to act in the world.

Then came the Quietist and Evangelical periods, which did not address the challenge of modernism: the findings of science, the emphasis on verifiable facts and theories based on research, such as evolution. Instead Quakers first separated themselves from the world, though still working actively for social change, and then turned back to scripture for guidance.

The Religious Society of Friends' move to Liberal Quakerism was a rejection of the Evangelical approach and an acceptance of modern thought. Ben Pink Dandelion<sup>ii</sup> states the four tenets of Liberal Quakerism delineated by John Wilhelm Rowntree and Rufus Jones as:

- experience is primary
- continuing revelation
- open to new light
- faith relevant to the age

## THE FUTURE OF QUAKERISM

The first two were a reclaiming of early Quakers' original spiritual foundation, looking to the Inward Light for direct guidance. The second two were embracing modern thought and looking to the future – an evolving spirituality.

\*\*\*\*\*

### *THE INWARD PATH*

#### *What We Need to Retain*

It is said the one Quaker dogma is the belief that there is 'that of God in every one'. We believe it is possible for everyone to set aside their ego and open a direct line to God and, in an attitude of expectant waiting, to receive guidance for our actions in the world. This is what we do in Meeting for Worship.

We are an experience-based religion. We give priority to our experience of Divine guidance continually revealing our way forward, rather than relying on clergy or scripture for guidance. Instead we go through a discernment process, both individually and corporately, to test the leading. It is why we say 'I hope so' rather than 'I will', because we don't know if the leading and guidance will change.

Consequently, to take an active part in the life of the meeting you must accept that a Source for this guidance exists. I have already used a number of words for it, God, Divine, Source, Inward Light, and there are many more: Jesus, Love, Goddess, Spirit, Web of Life, Christ, Something Greater, Creative Energy and so on. For the moment I will call it the Spiritual Realm<sup>iii</sup>. It is where ministry and leadings come from.

To be a Quaker it is necessary to accept that the Spiritual Realm exists. The modern and postmodern world tends to reject anything that is not objectively verifiable, and either refuses to accept the validity of the subjective world or says it is merely a social construction. As a friend of mine put it "humans have an emotional need to be rational".

Accepting that the Spiritual Realm exists is not based on a belief in its existence but in a *knowing* of its existence through a subjective experience of going there, by using a spiritual practice.

\*\*

#### *What We Need to Retrieve*

We need to reclaim challenge, depth and breadth in our spiritual life. These are all in *Quaker Faith & Practice*, but we seem to have lost focus on them or watered them down. We have become a comforting faith not a challenging one: providing a place of comfort and care instead of a firm

## THE FRIENDS QUARTERLY

container within which it is safe to be challenged, explore, experiment and grow. Remember, Quakers abolished the laity to all become clergy, which means, as members<sup>IV</sup>, turning your life over to God's guidance.

### *Darkness and Light*

The spiritual journey is one of inner transformation achieved by opening to the Inward Light and accepting the reality it reveals to us.

Early Friends rejected the concept of original sin and proclaimed there was 'that of God in everyone'. More recently, we have developed a tendency to focus on the light and shy away from the darkness in ourselves, each other or our meetings. But as George Fox discovered, it is through accepting all aspects of ourselves, our propensity for both good and evil that our transformation occurs. We all experience pain and suffering. We all do, think and feel bad things but that does not mean we are bad people, just human. Our spiritual journey is to open ourselves to the Inward Light, which will reveal our darkness and shadow<sup>V</sup> and learn to love it all. Denial is anathema to the spiritual path.

The work of Carl Jung has demonstrated that the shadow is not all negative. Depending upon our childhood experience, both good and bad attributes can be pushed into shadow and need to be brought back into consciousness to become a whole person.

Consequently, we must be willing to engage with our darkness and our shadow and provide support for each other to help us address both as they arise in our lives. The Experiment with Light, developed by Rex Ambler<sup>VI</sup> from George Fox's writings, is a practice that can raise shadow issues. This is often challenging and difficult work and we need a system to support each other, through such things as mentors, Meetings for Clearness and spiritual friendship groups.

### *Deeper*

We have become shallow, a flatland, saying things like 'anybody can be an elder' or 'the distinction between members and attenders is elitist, let's treat everyone the same'. How has this come about? Maybe we went too far when we moved from being exclusively birthright Friends and opened up to welcome all? Maybe, in our effort to be egalitarian and inclusive, we've got caught in the postmodern ego inflation of 'nobody can tell me what to do, think or believe' and have become part of the pluralistic culture which rejects all hierarchy and authority? But we all have dif-

## THE FUTURE OF QUAKERISM

ferent gifts, abilities, strengths and calling. We all have things we can learn from each other and teach to each other. (This political correctness that is uncomfortable with the word 'teach' is a symptom of the flatland culture I refer to above.)

We are a mystical tradition and all mystical paths acknowledge levels and stages on the spiritual journey. We progress through these stages at different rates, so inevitably some will have travelled deeper in the Spiritual Realm and be more experienced than others.

Consequently, we must supply maps of the Spiritual Realm and provide experienced travellers and guides who are familiar with the territory, can read the signposts, recognise the landscape, know which paths are dead ends and the dangers you're likely to meet on the way and can offer guidance. We must promote spiritual practices, which take people deeper.

The year I became a member of the Religious Society of Friends I came to a spiritual crisis and did not know who to go to within Quakers and, instead, went to a Buddhist for guidance. Later I thought, "This is wrong. I've joined a religious organisation but have to go outside of it for spiritual help and advice!" Similarly, many Friends have sought help from other traditions to deepen their spiritual practice.

### *Wider*

We are becoming narrow and by default excluding some pathways to God. Recently a seasoned Friend joined the Catholic church because she had reached a stage in her spiritual journey where she felt called to a closer and more devotional relationship with a personalised God. She felt this was not possible within Quakerism. Are we kowtowing to the postmodern discomfort with words like worship, prayer, surrender and the kind of God you bow-down to? Are we losing devoted members because we don't want to upset attenders and newer members with the language some of us want to use? (More on language below)

There are different pathways to God, different types of terrain in the Spiritual Realm. There is the intellectual path through studying religious texts; the inner, contemplative, silent path; the practical path via work and action in the world; the devotional path through worship and surrender; the physical path through body movement; and the path of sound using prayer and incantation.

Consequently, we must be inclusive of all types of people and accept the different pathways to God. We need to explain that all are of equal

## THE FRIENDS QUARTERLY

value and validity and equally welcome. We must help those who, because of their personal religious history, have difficulties with others following different paths to their own preferred one.

\*\*

*What We Need to Change/Introduce*

Within Meetings we are encountering difficulties with differences in belief, language and the concept of God. Up until last century Quakers were all Christians: birthright Friends and refugees from the Church with shared beliefs, language and spiritual practice. Reading the Bible and prayer was a familiar part of everyday life for them. Increasingly now we have refugees from the postmodern world, with a variety of religious backgrounds or none. Some reject the existence of a Spiritual Realm altogether and have no experience of a spiritual practice but find solace in our Meetings for Worship. Some carry painful baggage from religious encounters in their past and have difficulty with certain religious language. As Quakers we welcome all to our Meeting for Worship.

*Spiritual Practice*

New attenders with no religious background come into Meeting for Worship and don't know what to do. We expect them to sit in silence for an hour and 'centre down'. We speak of centring down in Meeting as if it is an easy and obvious thing to do, but it is not. It involves switching into a subtly different state of consciousness. You have to learn starting and opening techniques and how to recognise when you have made a connection, then how to listen and differentiate between the different things that come to you. This is the discernment process at the centre of Quaker practice and may be unfamiliar even to those from other religious backgrounds.

Consequently, we need to teach it. We need an introduction to opening and connecting for enquirers and new attenders, followed by a number of deepening practices as experience grows. Spiritual practice is like finger exercises on the piano: essential if you are ever to play easily and fluently. We need to develop the spiritual muscle. We need to open a pathway to the Spiritual Realm and gradually widen it and keep it clear by constant use, otherwise when you need guidance in an emergency, it will be too overgrown and you will not be able to get through or connect in a hurry.

As we travel further into the Spiritual Realm our spiritual practice needs

## THE FUTURE OF QUAKERISM

to change and deepen. We need to facilitate this by providing guides and appropriate training.

### *Language and Belief*

Increasingly, since the 1960s, all the religions of the world have become available to us. In my city I can think of at least six Buddhist centres, plus mosques, temples and many different Christian denominations. You can learn earth-based spiritualities and take part in pagan rituals. The complete list would be very long.

Traditionally people have turned to religion to answer the big questions like: why and what are we here for? How am I supposed to behave? The stories, language, concepts and images we are given as children in answer to these questions I call our spiritual mother tongue. It may be religious or secular. As adults we may choose other explanations from the wide number available to us. Many people now end up with a bit of a hodge-podge.

When we sit in Meeting for Worship and connect with the Spiritual Realm, we experience a different state of consciousness. The experience is a subjective, felt sense. To articulate it to ourselves, and even more so to others, we have to use words, images and concepts. It is frustratingly difficult. We are trying to describe the indescribable. The spiritual experience is beyond words. It is why religions and spiritual teachers use metaphor and story so much.

We have to *interpret* our experience, and to do so we use the language and beliefs from our personal, cultural history. For all Quakers a hundred years ago this would have been Christian. Now we cover a wide diversity of belief and language. Our worship grounded in silence allows for this.

People want to feel a part of their religious community and traditionally religions have defined themselves through shared beliefs and language. In our Meetings people often get upset by the language used by others.

Consequently, we must be clearer about what it is we share, what binds us together, as a community of Quakers and what it is okay for us to be different in.

We share a spiritual practice in which, through a continual and continuing process of discernment, we open ourselves to the Inward Light, to reveal our darkness and allow it to transform us, then go out and act in the world from that place.

Nowadays we may use different language and different beliefs to

## THE FRIENDS QUARTERLY

express what we experience when we open ourselves to the Inward Light. We must learn to be tolerant and accepting of each others' language and beliefs, which are based on our individual personal and cultural history and learn to *translate* between them. This will take time and will require some training.

We must offer support and understanding to those who are upset by another's language. They may need help to heal past religious hurts. We need to train elders and overseers in these roles.

We do have a particular Quaker language we share, which we could do more to define and use.

### *Concept of God*

In postmodern Britain, attitudes to religion have changed dramatically with a wholesale rejection of the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent father image of God. Quakers have sought for a new conception of the Divine, but we have mainly done this individually rather than corporately. We have slipped into not talking about religious belief for fear of offending or upsetting others. In the process we have lost a clear sense of who we are as Quakers. We value and stress our religious diversity, but when asked to define Quakerism we tend to do it by what we are not. Saying such things as, 'we don't have a creed, altar, sacred buildings, clergy, ceremonies'. This is not good enough.

Discussions about the existence or non-existence of God have been raging for centuries and are crucial to a belief-based religion. However, Quakerism is an experience-based religion whose worship is founded in silent communion. This has enabled us to accept a wide diversity of belief within our meetings and to side-step the debate about the nature of God, but nevertheless underlying tensions have been growing and need to be addressed.

I find the integral philosopher Ken Wilber's<sup>vii</sup> analysis and concept of the 1-2-3 of God or the 3 Faces of Spirit useful here. He defines 1st person, 2nd person & 3rd person perspectives of God<sup>viii</sup>.

- 1st person God is experienced within oneself – the Witness, Higher Self, Soul – immanent. The Eastern contemplative traditions especially focus on this.
- 2nd person God is experienced as an external being – the Divine Thou to whom I must surrender – transcendent. The theistic traditions of the West especially focus on this.

## THE FUTURE OF QUAKERISM

- 3rd person God is experienced as present in the Web of Life, the Great Perfection of existence itself, Nature - manifest. Wilber says Spinoza made this conception of God famous.

The Christian church has always focused on the 2nd person perspective of God and discouraged or completely rejected 1st and 3rd person perspectives. In postmodern Britain many people are now embracing 1st person and 3rd person pathways to God. The desire for 1st person God is apparent in the huge rise in popularity in all forms of personal spiritual exploration and paths to altered states of consciousness, with such practices as meditation, yoga, martial arts, reiki and drug taking. The re-emergence of earth-based spiritualities and the birth of the eco movement are examples of current explorations into the 3rd face of God.

Many refugees from the postmodern world that come into our meetings reject the 2nd person God, the great Thou to whom you must bow down and surrender. Instead since the 1960s people have been seeking a personal experience, 1st person God, and reject the explanations of theology and the beliefs that the traditions require. I think this is what people mean when they talk about being “spiritual but not religious.” However, the danger of having no 2nd person God is that it encourages the ego inflation, mentioned above, that is so prevalent in postmodern culture.

Unlike the other Christian denominations, Quakers have always put the 1st person experience of God foremost and included in it the 2nd person approach of surrendering one’s ego to God’s will. Recently, with the growth of the green/eco/climate change concern, Quakers are now accepting the 3rd person perspective too. Our Meeting for Worship grounded in silence embraces all three faces and allows individuals to approach from the perspective they feel most speaks to their condition. My use of the term Spiritual Realm encompasses all three.

Consequently, our postmodern world needs a 2nd person concept of God that includes current knowledge about the universe and human psychology. Quakers are well placed to provide this as we have already embraced scientific knowledge, and surveys<sup>ix</sup> show that most of us have been developing our own individual concepts. We now need to address it corporately and articulate a 2nd person concept of God that we can all be comfortable with and speaks to our present condition.

\*\*

## THE FRIENDS QUARTERLY

*Conclusions about the Inward Path*

A hundred years ago Quakers were a tightly knit, community of Christian birthright Friends; now the majority of Quakers in Britain are convinced Friends from a variety of religious or secular backgrounds. This presents us with certain challenges that need to be addressed.

We need to be a lot more explicit about what Quakerism is to both the general public and to attenders at our meetings. Convinced Friends do not learn Quakerism at their mother's knee and need to be taught it, in all its aspects and in well-defined stages, including preparation for membership and the continuing deepening of our spiritual life. Negligence in doing this has led to a variety of problems in our Meetings.

We need to reassert the spiritual practice at our core plus the breadth and depth it encompasses and the challenge of embracing our darkness that is inherent in a spiritual life.

We are an experience-based not belief-based religion, which enables us to distinguish between our shared spiritual practice and the beliefs and language used to express our individual religious experience. This very useful distinction combined with our worship grounded in silence enable us to accommodate the plurality of language and belief current in 21st century Britain. However, we need to address more directly the tensions and conflicts this creates, learn to accept each other's religious language, concepts and beliefs and learn to translate.

For instance: the Quaker spiritual practice we share is that through a process of continuing and continual discernment we open ourselves to the Inward Light, to reveal our darkness and allow the experience to transform us, and then go out and act in the world from that place. It was through this practice that early Quakers achieved the heightened inner state of consciousness they called the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. It is the mystical core of all traditions.

For traditional Christians this may be expressed as: through prayer to Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit washes away our sins. We are forgiven and born again in God's name, then carry this message into the world to help others, and be assured of a place in heaven.

For Buddhists as: through a deepening meditation practice, we step aside from grasping desire and welcome all aspects of ourselves, to achieve enlightenment and take the Bodhisattva vow to work for the happiness of all.

For Jungians as: through journaling, dream work and psychotherapy we

## THE FUTURE OF QUAKERISM

reclaim and integrate our shadow and shift from identification with the small self to the Higher Self and so achieve self-actualisation.

Or, to put it most simply: listen and do what Love requires of us.

\*\*\*

### *OUR CORPORATE BODY*

#### *What We Need to Retain*

Our newly revised structure of Local Meeting, Area Meeting, Meeting for Sufferings and Britain Yearly Meeting serves us well and facilitates our own particular version of a balanced bottom-up, top-down, decision-making process. George Fox saw the dangers of individuals mistaking their ego-inflated desires for Divine guidance and introduced testing by the meeting of leadings from Spirit. Recent consciousness studies are talking of a 'group mind' that reaches higher states of consciousness and makes better decisions than the separate individuals are capable of, which matches our experience in our Meeting for Worship for Business<sup>X</sup>.

Our practice of rotation of roles and responsibilities helps prevent the development of a fixed power hierarchy or the idolisation of past or current leaders. Clerks, elders and overseers are servants, not rulers, of the Meeting, entrusted by the Meeting with the authority to carry out their duties.

A clerk of a Meeting for Worship for Business learns to trust and surrender to the process we use. Change has its own rhythm and pace, which the clerk watches for and enables but cannot force. One Area Meeting clerk likened the process to a tapestry being woven with threads from the members present. All are trying to discern the image emerging and adding their bit to make it clearer. When the clerk feels s/he can see the image s/he writes a description, in the form of a minute, then offers it to the meeting to see if it matches the tapestry they see. This process continues until the tapestry is completed and the last threads are cut, ie when a minute is accepted.

\*\*

#### *What We Need to Retrieve*

##### *Meeting for Worship for Business*

In many Meetings attenders are being welcomed to take a full part in Meeting for Worship for Business, and new members are appointed as clerks with no or little instruction in the Quaker business method of decision-making based on Divine guidance. This can lead to frustration at the

## THE FRIENDS QUARTERLY

slow pace and calls for voting or writing the minutes later as a way of speeding things up.

Consequently, we must explain that the basis of our business method is seeking together what was called the will of God but is now more often referred to as a discernment process seeking for the spirit of the meeting. The terminology changes but the essence of the practice remains the same, in that we are stepping aside from our individual desires and opening ourselves to guidance as to the best way forward with a trust, based on experience, that, if we use our tried and tested methods, working together we can better come to the right decision.

### *Conflict in Meeting*

We are skilled in conflict resolution and 'speak truth to power' in the world, but we are not so good within our own Meetings. In the same way as we have moved away from addressing our personal shadow or darkness, we have also become squeamish about addressing the shadow in our Meetings.

Consequently, we must retrieve our willingness to challenge each other and listen with love. We must stop smoothing things over with placatory words and address the underlying upset feelings before the piles of dirt brushed under the carpet get so bad you can hardly walk across without twisting your ankle!

### *Membership*

To my surprise, in writing this essay, I have come to realise the significance and importance of the distinction between attenders and members. In many Meetings now, with the difficulties in finding enough people to fill the list of jobs, long-term attenders are treated the same as members and are appointed to many positions once felt only appropriate for members. This blurring of distinction has been encouraged by the lack of any particular training for membership.

Consequently, if we have truly abolished the laity and all members are ministers, then does that make enquirers and attenders laity and long-term attenders novices? If we are all ministers and have committed ourselves to trying to live our lives under Divine guidance, this requires support in spiritual training, practice and community.

We need more thorough preparation for membership of the Society.<sup>xi</sup> It must be a graduated, structured path, as we don't want to frighten off

## THE FUTURE OF QUAKERISM

new attenders, who are tentatively putting their toe in religious waters and are still scared of getting out of their depth and drowning. We must let them go at their own pace.

I suggest we need four levels of training and support for the spiritual journey:

1. new attenders – opening/beginners practice in how to centre down, plus basic Quaker terms, history and structures.
2. regular attenders – core spiritual practice, Quaker business method.
3. preparation for membership – mentoring preferably from someone on same path type, deepening spiritual practice, shadow/darkness work.
4. members – spiritual friends, support groups, meeting for clearness, shadow/darkness work, deepen practice, support/guide through spiritual crises.

This raises questions about the role of elders. Should they be given training so they can introduce attenders to Quakerism? If not elders then who? Not everyone is willing or able to go to Woodbrooke. Should completing specific training be a condition of membership? The visitors need to make sure they ask about an applicant's spiritual life and understanding of Quaker practice and business method. One socially active attender applied for membership of the Society and prepared answers to questions about her religious beliefs. The seasoned Friends who visited her were so excited about her activism she was never asked about her spiritual life at all. This is wrong.

Should all visitors be experienced elders? Could visitors become mentors or be responsible for finding mentors for applicants? Or should mentors be provided when someone first applies for membership and starts on the training?

These are all matters requiring prayerful consideration.

\*\*

### *What We Need to Change*

#### *Meeting for Worship for Business*

Our business Meetings, both local and area, have decreasing numbers of people attending. Newcomers complain that they are long-winded, slow, boring and, at their worst, full of petty, pedantic, nit-picking about 'right-ordering'. Often when a topic is laid before them people are floundering around, not knowing where to begin because they are inexperienced in

## THE FRIENDS QUARTERLY

Quaker process and/or don't know enough of the topic to make any contribution. So it can be very slow, with people saying whatever comes into their head. This is enough to convince any newcomer that it is an experience they do not wish to repeat.

More seasoned<sup>xii</sup> Friends sometimes feel the sense of worship has gone from our business Meetings. It is the sense of a deep connection that is nurturing and transforming that keeps us coming to Meetings for Worship. If that element is missing people will drop away.

We need to reconsider what 'to come with hearts and minds prepared' means?

Our business method of decision-making was created/consolidated when Quakers were a tight-knit cohesive community of birthright Friends, who all knew everything that was going on, had been involved in the whole history of each topic and knew the previous decisions and why they were taken. They came to a business Meeting with hearts and minds fully prepared.

We are no longer a tight-knit, relatively-closed community who know everything that is going on. Each business Meeting is likely to have a different collection of people attending. Many, or even most, people present will *not* know the history or details of a subject. The majority of our membership are convinced Friends new to Quaker practices. Many are the only Quaker in the family (SQUIFs) and coming to Meeting is only one thing in a very full and busy life. Even seasoned Friends move around a lot more now and may be new to a particular Meeting. In addition, because of our rotating leadership, often the clerk may not be aware of all the previous ramifications. So we are no longer gathered with hearts and minds prepared.

We cannot re-create the conditions of the past so we must adapt our methods to suit our present conditions.

To have hearts and minds prepared is first to do all that the human mind, skills and ingenuity can do towards solving the problem or making the decision. All possible avenues must be explored and all possible actions taken. It is only when that is complete, when all our thoughts, ideas and feelings on the subject have been explored and laid to rest, that we are able to clear our minds and open to Divine guidance as to the right way forward.

We must provide a forum in which to gather and explore the facts, put forward ideas, share experience and hear our hopes, doubts and fears by

## THE FUTURE OF QUAKERISM

using our rationality, openness and sensitivity. Many of our Quaker ways are useful for this process. We can use the guidelines for creative listening, worship sharing and threshing for this in small groups. Most of the preparatory work can be done in this way. This was demonstrated at Yearly Meeting 2009 with the subject of committed relationships, which resulted in our radical decision to treat same-sex and opposite sex marriages identically.

I am aware that some in our Meetings think this is all that the Quaker business method is, and use it with other non-religious groups with great success. But there is a final stage when rationality has taken us as far as it is able and there are a number of viable courses of action possible and a choice has to be made, and each person has different preferences. It is at this point that we need to go into worship and seek Divine guidance/God's will. In worship we can put aside the facts and put aside our personal ideas and feelings because they have all been explored and heard, and open ourselves to the Inward Light.

Our experience shows us that if we have done the groundwork, if we have our hearts and minds prepared and we sit together in silent worship, then guidance and a decision will come. And the result is often unexpected and leaves us feeling uplifted. We must remember that the test of a successful discernment process is in the nature of its fruits, both short and long-term.

How would this work in practice to make our business Meetings more relevant, interesting, meaningful and spiritual? Where it is lost could it return our business Meetings to being/feeling like Meetings for Worship? Could it help to make our decisions truly Spirit inspired? Could it return our business meetings to their rightful place at the centre of who we are and what we do as Quakers?

We have confounded our Meetings for Worship for Business with too many extraneous things. Meeting for Worship for Business is not an information-gathering tool or a place for rational debate or for the supplying of objective facts or exploring personal doubts and fears. All these things are necessary components to a successful decision being reached, but most of it needs to be done before worship starts.

Consequently, we must make a distinction between information gathering, exploring the subject and worshipful decision-making. Preparatory information can be provided by newsletter and email – with 'postal trees' for those not on email. Exploration can be done in small groups before going into worship.

## THE FRIENDS QUARTERLY

### *Roles and Responsibilities*

In the past much of the work of the Meeting was done by women who were full-time housewives and professional businessmen who had staff to assist them. Work patterns and gender roles have changed, life is lived at a faster pace and people are much busier. Now nominations committees increasingly have a problem finding members to fill all the roles required for the running of a Meeting.

Consequently, many of the roles need to be re-assessed in the light of the changes in the world and in the membership and in the more transitory nature of Quaker community. We are no longer a homogenous community. Often nowadays we know each other in neither the things that are mundane nor the things that are eternal.

Do we need to reassess what jobs are appropriate for attenders and which need to be done by a member? What jobs can be sub-divided or shared?

\*\*

### *Conclusions about our Corporate Body*

In the last century the Religious Society of Friends has moved from being a close-knit community of birthright Christian Friends to a majority of convinced Friends from diverse backgrounds with very busy lives. We must adapt the way we implement our business method to accommodate this.

Our great strength is our balanced bottom-up, top-down, decision-making method, where individual leadings are tested by a Meeting of members who open to immediate Divine guidance; plus a corporate structure where concerns may be passed up from Local Meetings, culminating in the decision of Britain Yearly Meeting which are open to all members to participate in. Our discipline is to accept these corporate decisions and trust they are God's will. We need to explain this better to newcomers.

The true distinction between enquirers, attenders and members at our meetings is the level of commitment to a spiritually-led life. This should be reflected in the type and levels of training we provide and the allotment of roles and responsibilities.

\*\*\*

### *THE OUTWARD PATH*

Quakers are most well known for our activities in the world, working to bring peace, equality and justice to all. Many mystical traditions, which saw the spiritual journey as one of inner transformation, felt they needed

## THE FUTURE OF QUAKERISM

to isolate themselves from the world and concentrate on their personal spiritual development to achieve their goal of transcendence in the after-life. Quakers have been less concerned about what happens to us after we die, and more concerned about the conditions for people in the world we live in now.

### *What We Need to Retain*

Quaker testimonies to peace, truth, equality, simplicity and justice continue to inspire us to service, and Quakers are engaged in many diverse projects worldwide. A calling to ministry may be expressed by outward action in the world, work within the Society, deepening inner spiritual practice or any combination of these. It will most likely be different at different phases of our life.

\*\*

### *What We Need to Retrieve*

As with spoken ministry in Meeting for Worship, our active ministry in the world comes from our spiritual practice of opening in expectant waiting for Divine guidance. If the way forward is not clear we can test our leading in a Meeting for Worship for Business or a Meeting for Clearness. It is this that distinguishes Quaker work from the social activism of a humanist organisation. We have not lost this aspect but we need to re-emphasise it. Many attenders encounter Quakers in activist settings and, finding they share the same values, come along to our Meetings.

Consequently, we must make clear that our actions stem from a spiritual connection that leads to inner transformation and discerned guidance as to the best way forward. This is important because the impetus behind an action affects the outcome. A life-long social activist, who joined the Society in middle age, said her activities continued the same but instead of being driven by anger, as she was in her youth, she was now driven by love and was more effective for it.

\*\*

### *What We Need to Change*

#### *Testimony to the Environment*

Our testimonies have changed as the times we live in have changed. Now a growing testimony is to the earth and the environment with the focus on the challenge of climate change and the required shift from an oil-based economy. This is a challenge to all of us as to how we live our lives and run our Meeting Houses.

## THE FRIENDS QUARTERLY

*Outreach*

A few years ago I attended a five-day retreat held jointly by Woodbrooke and Buddhist nuns from Thich Nhat Hanh's Plum Village. At the penultimate Meeting for Worship, one of the Thich Nhat Hanh's British followers ministered saying she had not known that Quakers existed, a British religious group with values she had gone to an eastern religion to find. Her tone was sad, wistful and her implication was that she would have preferred a religious tradition from her own culture, and if she had known about us she would have become a Quaker not a Buddhist.

During Quaker Quest in my Area Meeting it became apparent that the public perception of Quakers is a couple of hundred years out of date. Liberal Quakerism is not known beyond the Society. When I told a cousin I had started attending Quaker Meeting, she started 'theeing' and 'thouing' at me! We have a precious jewel to offer, but we keep it hidden in the dark not even showing it to those who come to our Meetings unless they catch a glimpse of it shining through a few seasoned Friends.

Consequently, we must do more to present an accurate and up-to-date picture of ourselves. A century ago we shifted to Liberal Quakerism, but who outside of Quaker circles knows that Liberal Quakerism even exists let alone what it consists of? We have been so averse to proselytising that the general public perception of us is closer to how we were in the Quietist period than the present.

We have focused on social activism but there is a great spiritual hunger out there that Quakers are ideally suited to satisfy. We need to develop our *spiritual activism*. Liberal Quakerism is so relevant to the postmodern world that we are ideally placed to provide a bridge between the established religious traditions and whatever they will evolve into. Not spiritual activism in the sense of evangelical-style conversion, but in helping to explore and define a religion, with a 2nd person concept of God and grounded in the Western tradition, that embraces both modernism and postmodernism – the findings of science and acknowledgement of the influence of the cultural context.

Also we have a unique, tried and tested business method to offer the world, which provides a decision-making process which is non-hierarchical, egalitarian, inclusive and utilises group consciousness to achieve inspired outcomes.

\*\*\*\*\*

## THE FUTURE OF QUAKERISM

### *CONCLUSION*

As a member of the 'boomer' generation, I rejected the churches and Buddhism for being too hidebound by tradition. I travelled through the time of the burgeoning personal growth movement and New Age spiritualities, and saw the dangers of such things as the ego inflation of charismatic leaders. The structures, ways and practices of the Religious Society of Friends have been tested over centuries and provide safeguards against the pitfalls of religious organisations and personal spiritual journeys that so many others fall into. We must take care before we tamper with them.

But that does not mean we should leave things unaltered. True to Liberal Quakerism, we must continue to have a faith relevant to the age we live in and be open to new light. We must adapt to accommodate new knowledge and understanding of our world, but not without prayerful consideration and careful discernment. We must always refer back to the great store of wisdom we have accumulated and not let go of any of it lightly. Everything I have written above in the sections headed 'retain' and 'retrieve' is in Quaker Faith & Practice, and we have many seasoned Friends who have a deep spiritual connection and live the Quaker Way. They still hold the heart of British Quakerism and they provide examples and patterns for the rest of us to walk by.

We are hiding our light under a bushel. The general public may know and admire us for our peace testimony and our social activism in the world (of which some of us are inordinately proud) but they know nothing of Quaker spirituality. There is spiritual starvation out there. We have the means to feed them, or rather to help them feed themselves, but we are hiding it when we should be offering it to the world. We will never have a mass following because we are an esoteric not exoteric religion. We do not provide a set of rules with an assurance that as long as you follow the rules you will be saved in the afterlife. Instead, we support each other in finding and following our own spiritual path. What we can and should be offering is a spiritual path, which has been tested through three hundred and fifty years of tradition, that is relevant and can speak to the post-modern world: where in silence we centre ourselves and in an attitude of expectant waiting open ourselves to Divine guidance.

My greatest and central concern, however, is that we are in danger of losing the most important gift we have to offer to the world because we are not being clear enough with attenders and those accepted into mem-

## THE FRIENDS QUARTERLY

bership about the true nature of Quaker spirituality. We are not telling them the spiritual practice at our heart. Consequently, we are in danger of losing touch with the source of our strength, and fading into becoming another secular, humanist, social-action organisation.

We must put our spiritual life back at the centre of the Religious Society of Friends. All are welcome to attend our Meetings for Worship, but we must introduce attenders to Quaker spirituality, ways and practices when they are ready. We must help them to centre down and connect, so they can enter the Spiritual Realm and experience a sense of guidance. We must provide a programme of training for those wanting to become members. We must provide avenues of support to members in deepening their spiritual life.

We are told in *Advices & Queries* that they are offered for the 'comfort and discomfort of Friends'. A spiritual journey brings joy and challenges and we need a community in which we can reveal, share and explore both our darkness and our light. It is time to find a way past our discomfort with talking about our spiritual lives and religious beliefs and learn to open to each other. This requires building an atmosphere of trust in which things difficult to say and hear can be safely expressed and support offered to find a way forward. Our diversity of religious belief and language presents us with a challenge, and an opportunity, to transform it from a problem that divides us, to a gift that enriches us.

The future of Quakerism in Britain is indeed bright if we both reassert and redefine for the 21st century the religion at our centre and that is the source of our inspiration. Quakers inherit a unique combination of religious wisdom, spiritual practice, style of worship, testimonies, organisational structures and business method that are particularly well suited to the postmodern world. Our religious wisdom gleaned over three and a half centuries, and our shared spiritual practice, offer a depth and breadth and solidity to our spiritual life unavailable to newer religious groups. Our style of worship, grounded in silence, allows us to embrace the diversity of belief and plurality of spiritual language current in British society. Our testimonies and *Advices & Queries* offer us guidelines for how to behave, appropriate to the postmodern world. Our organisational structures and business method enable us to be flexible and responsive to new knowledge and ideas, without throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

As the Religious Society of Friends we share a spiritual practice that, through a continuing and continual process of discernment, we open our

## THE FUTURE OF QUAKERISM

selves to the Inward Light, to reveal our darkness and allow it to transform us, then go out and act in the world from that place. This is the treasure at our core. Let us both strengthen it within our meetings and proclaim it to the world.

I quieten, I open my heart, I connect, I enter the stillness.  
We become One.

\*\*\*

### REFERENCES

- <sup>i</sup> The first was known as the first axial age and was a shift from nature-based and blood sacrifice to the current major religious traditions based on love and compassion. See Karen Armstrong's books.
- <sup>ii</sup> P65 Pink Dandelion, *The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2008.
- <sup>iii</sup> Throughout this essay I will use a variety of words for the Source of our guidance, the Spiritual Realm, I will use a capital letter to denote them.
- <sup>iv</sup> This essay is addressed to members of Britain Yearly Meeting. Attenders may or may not wish to make a spiritual commitment though all are welcome at our meetings. I have no experience of Quakers worldwide.
- <sup>v</sup> George Fox was aware of the ego and the shadow 300 years before Freud and Jung, respectively, named the concepts.
- <sup>vi</sup> Rex Ambler, *Light to Live By: An Exploration in Quaker Spirituality*, Quaker Books, 2001.
- <sup>vii</sup> I would like to acknowledge here the great debt I owe to Ken Wilber and his 'Integral map', which provides an all encompassing framework within which to understand the relationships between everything.
- <sup>viii</sup> Ken Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, Integral Books Shambhala, 2006.  
Ken Wilber, *The Integral Vision: A very short introduction to the Revolutionary Integral Approach to Life, God, the Universe and Everything*, Integral Books Shambhala, 2007.
- <sup>ix</sup> See p68, Pink Dandelion, 'The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction', Oxford University Press, 2008.
- <sup>x</sup> I prefer to use the term 'Meeting for Worship for Business' rather than 'Meeting for Church affairs' because it emphasises that it is primarily a Meeting for Worship where we seek God's guidance.
- <sup>xi</sup> *Quaker Faith & Practice*, ch.11.
- <sup>xii</sup> By the term 'seasoned' I do not mean old in that they have lived through many seasons but rather well steeped in Quakerism as in fully flavoured. They are to be found amongst members of all ages.