

# What is the future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain?

Does the Religious Society of Friends in Britain have a meaningful future? It might do, but this is not a given. We are a persistent lot, but our persistence is not guaranteed. In exploring what our future might hold, I will draw out the major problems and prospects we face over the next generation, and look at how our beliefs and practices might help or hinder our survival.

I will frame my enquiry with a few assumptions. First, what do I mean by 'future'? I will take it to mean up to 2059 and beyond (ie to my 80th year). This period feels far ahead enough to be visionary, in the sense that significant changes could happen. However, it is conceivable enough to be meaningful. By the survival of the Religious Society of Friends, I assume the ongoing existence of an identifiable religious group, whose beliefs and practices are recognisably developed from those of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain today.

This thought about 'identifiable religious group' highlights a key focus for my essay, that of identity. What are the essentials, if any, which we need to hold onto in order to remain recognisably Quaker, and how do we best do this? I'll explore this key question in more depth under 'Beliefs' below.

To give some advance notice of my main thesis – our identity is currently strongly located in our practice, in particular the way we run our meetings for worship for business. This strategy has its attractions, because it allows for great flexibility of belief. However, I will argue that this emphasis on practice is unsustainable. Our practices need to rest on a core of clearly-articulated common beliefs, otherwise they risk becoming empty and artificial structures.

Further, I believe that complications and confusion over core beliefs, if left unresolved, will rapidly undermine our identity and effectiveness as an organisation.

## Not just numbers

I want to enlarge on two possible senses of 'survive'. One straightforward sense is the question whether, in 2059, there will be a viable number of Quakers alive and practising.

Chadkirk and Dandelion (Present and Prevented 2009, see below) have focused on this area, and have highlighted some worries, including an eventual point where our numbers simply tail off (perhaps in 30 years' time), and the apparent major decline in the number of children who are closely involved with the Religious Society of Friends.

They are probably right to raise concerns about a 'demographic time bomb', not least because our current way of doing business at a national and local level relies on a strong group of active 60-80-year-olds, who have no obvious replacements. If our numbers do fall dramatically, we will have to be ready to trim our obligations and bureaucracy, too.

Though I recognise this danger, my own view is that the 'number of Quakers' concern is wrapped up in the question of identity.

A secure and vibrant sense of Quaker identity is likely to increase our numbers. Conversely, spreading the label 'Quaker' too thinly (eg 'everyone who has experienced a Quaker meeting at some point') like it could lead to problems.

A recent market research survey (DVL Smith, November 2009) has good and bad news for Quakers. On the one hand, many more people are aware of the term 'Quaker' than we might have guessed. On the other hand, their beliefs about what Quakers are like are rather inaccurate. Again, this supports my focus on questions of identity rather than head-counting. It seems reasonable to infer that many potential Quakers are put off getting to know us because of their misconceptions about what we are like (eg we are thought to be old-fashioned and orthodox).

It looks like the obvious route to increasing (or maintaining) our membership is to be clearer about who we are and what we believe.

## What is the Religious Society of Friends for?

It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine our corporate aims in great detail (and a definitive summary of shared Quaker aims may elude any analysis), but I do think it important to make some assumptions.

One might describe the Religious Society of Friends as: *a mechanism for discovering and manifesting spiritual experience and insight; a way of building God's kingdom together; a shared journey in pursuit of the truth; a support system for DIY Christianity (and/or post-Christian spirituality).*

This summary has taken some thought on my part (but then I would say that!). Could any Friend on the bench give such a summary? I don't mean the same exact formulation, but would they feel able to put the main aims of the Religious Society of Friends into a few brief sentences?

I suggest that many Friends might not be able or willing to do so, and that this poses a problem for our future.

Although we do not need (or want) a narrow statement of creed, we do need a degree of clarity about our shared purposes and aims. A shared sense of 'what we're supposed to be doing' helps underpin many other subordinate beliefs and practices, because it highlights where we expect our truths and inspirations to spring from.

It is worth underlining the fact that we could conceive our shared purposes as being utterly open-ended. For example, we might say 'to wait on what the Spirit has for us and to act according to its prompting'. There are no constraints here about particular types of action or narrow doctrine. But even this seemingly provisional statement has a clear starting point, and requires some common assumptions.

My view is that our increasing vagueness about what our 'starting point' is can no longer be ignored.

Having suggested why it is important to try to articulate some shared core beliefs, I now want to expand on what core beliefs for the Religious Society of Friends might look like.

## Beliefs

Words can clearly be divisive and limiting. A great strength of the Religious Society of Friends is our commitment to continuing revelation, to truth being revealed in new ways to new generations. I often think of us as having a shared book with many blank pages at the back, ready for new generations to set down their shared truths. God is clearly bigger than our limited human vocabulary and it is good that our core approaches (silence, lack of dogma) support that.

In conversation, a Friend once told me how she had given up talking of 'beliefs', but now used the word 'experiences' instead. Her thought was that beliefs tend to have connotations of truth or falsity, and hence are more contentious, whereas 'experiences' seem naturally more authentic and immediately imply a measure of subjectivity.

I think that this is a very helpful formulation, and ties in neatly with what we describe as our experiential faith. It also aligns with our post-modern desire for 'truth in *my* experience' as opposed to received truth.

Whether we talk of beliefs or experiences, a big question remains: are there any essentials?

For the current generation of the Religious Society of Friends, our Christian roots form a key strand. Frequent references to 'God' are found not only in our corporate text, *Quaker faith & practice*, but also in Yearly Meeting epistles and public statements eg on sustainability: 'the Earth is God's work and not ours to do with as we please' (Meeting for Sufferings, June 2009). For many active Friends, this vocabulary is the richest way of speaking their experience.

However, it is clear that Quaker understanding in Britain is becoming ever more pluralistic. We now have prominent Quaker Jews, Muslims, Atheists, and Agnostics. I do not for a moment want to suggest that these new sources of light are damaging, or misleading. They make us much more than we would be without them.

However, I do feel that the more pluralistic our experiences are, the more difficult it is to express them clearly.

Further, where diversity of theology creates uncertainty (eg profound questions like 'whose will are we seeking?'), it is possible that this uncertainty might lead us to make our decision-making more bureaucratic than it should be, in an effort to secure a (misguided) sense of 'due process'.

If we have a clear sense of the Spirit at work, we do not require such lengthy consultation or compromise. George Fox and other early Friends were able to act boldly and steadfastly because they had a clear experience of the Spirit at work. Our more laborious discernment might be a symptom of our woollier perception of where the Spirit is leading us.

Given that some kind of complete detachment from our Christian roots seems inevitable, the question must be: can we do this and still have a meaningful theology or at least, spiritual identity? The idea of 'certain uncertainty' is alluring, but how to be articulate it and use it as a tool to transform our lives?

I would say that as a minimum, we should be able to agree on something like:

*There is something beyond our individual human experiences, which when experienced together directly, transforms and directs our lives into a positive, loving force for good in the world.*

Personally, I find great comfort in knowing this something as 'God'. Though I began my spiritual journey in another, more Christocentric yearly meeting, I am comfortable with a slightly abstract formulation such as the phrase above. It is a more neutral version of something like 'there is one, even Jesus Christ, who can speak to thy condition' [Fox] coupled with Penn's "True godliness don't turn men out of the world but enables them to live better in it...'

I think we can probably live without 'God language', but we do need to accept that there is *something* we are attending to when sitting in meeting. For much of our history this direct experience has been comprehensively described with Christian language.

We need to be honest and sensitive with our language if we are to find a more inclusive vocabulary which does not trivialise our experience into platitudes. What we can't do is shy away from putting our experience into words, or deliberately 'toning down' our experience in a misguided effort to avoid alienating others.

Current anxieties and a reluctance to use any language to talk of our experience is misguided. Early Friends forged and tested their truths, sharing their experience deeply and urgently:

<sup>14</sup>Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.

<sup>15</sup>Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.

Matthew 5:14-15

It almost goes without saying that this keenly felt and deeply tested experience is what enabled early Friends to do so much in the face of great persecution and hostility.

## Practice

“Time is what we want most, but use worst”

Penn

A major weakness of the Religious Society of Friends today is that we tend to hold our practices too tightly, in compensation for our ‘loose’ beliefs. The misguided hope is that ‘our Quaker way of doing things’ becomes a secure place for our shared Quaker identity. This has been highlighted by Ben Pink Dandelion in his idea of orthodoxy being replaced by ‘orthopraxis’.

However, our practice and way of doing business should be the outcome of our discernment, not just a ‘walled garden’ where Quaker Discernment could be constrained too tightly. As mentioned in my introduction, discernment with some clear starting assumptions will get us further than narrow prescriptivism about the way we do the discernment.

We have a very efficient and ‘open’ mode of worship and approach to discovering and sharing truth. We have dispensed with as many obstacles as possible. This has been done not in a destructive or nihilistic sense, but with the idea that we should clear the clutter which lies between us and God. Perhaps we should prune our practices, too? The need to put beliefs into practice efficiently will become more critical as we have less time and money in the decades ahead.

## Ministry at arm's length

Looking at the national picture, we are fond of pointing to the fact that we have no 'paid ministers'. Our 120-odd paid staff at Friends House may not be ministers in the traditional sense, but they do perform a great deal of important work on our behalf, which one might call 'ministry-in-action'.

We sometimes convince ourselves that they are like a neutral civil service, faithfully carrying out only that work which has been discerned by their committees. Were this really the case, very little would get done at a national level! We rely on our staff to use their professional judgment in interpreting our sometimes vague and conflicting priorities.

There are about 500-600 Friends serving on committees which oversee and support this national 'ministry-in-action', not counting Yearly Meeting in session and occasional wider consultations on particular issues. So we have something like one paid national staff member for every 100 members, and something like one national committee position for every 25 members.

Despite these efforts to make national structures as representative as possible, there is still a sense of distance between 'the centre' and Friends in meetings. This is somewhat odd, given that all the policies and projects taken forward at a national level are directed by groups which are made up of 'local' Friends, who should be feeding information and views from and to their local Quaker community.

Nevertheless, much important work done at a national level somehow totally escapes the notice of Friends in meetings. This is a problem, as it leads to a 'them and us' culture, and a troubling shortfall in financial support by Friends of work which they have themselves directed and requested.

One radical idea might be to 'localise' our resources and projects. The ultimate move might be to localise our work fully; a network of regional Quaker 'ministry-in-action' teams, accountable directly to a much smaller constituency of Friends. In addition to being more efficient, this would have the effect of making us more visible and responsive in our own communities. It would also be a bit closer to the original model of 'Quaker work', that of releasing Friends from financial considerations while they carried through their response to a (corporately tested) concern. We would be better placed and equipped to respond to the needs of our neighbours, not just the foreign news pages of *the Guardian*.

This regional, 'distributed' model of 'ministry-in-action' is quite radical, and we may need a more incremental approach to resolving the issues posed by our national structures.

The suggestion of distributed or localized Quaker work is not intended to gloss over or ignore the benefits of consolidating work at a national level. Coordinating work at a national level allows for economies of scale, gives Quakers a visible 'hub', and is a very effective way of accumulating, applying and distributing expertise.

An obvious example is our innovative and cross-cutting approach to peacemaking, which might be hard to sustain on a smaller scale. (Though there are many effective small peace-making efforts run by Quakers locally). The DVL Smith market research found that many people who were barely familiar with Quakers did have a sense of us as being people who are deeply committed to peace. It is possible that smaller-scale, more diverse efforts at peace-making might make this aspect of our identity less visible.

In other areas, too our ability to develop expertise and influence by concentrating work at a national level might not be preserved in a more scattered system. However, I offer the thought of a regionalised approach to 'ministry-in-action' as a way of making our work and use of shared resources more responsive and efficient. It would also radically reduce the administrative overhead we take on in ensuring that 'distant' national structures serve every meeting's needs and priorities. We must make the process simpler, more sustainable and more direct. I think we need to be asking questions at this kind of level, rather than relabelling structures and shifting the focus of a committee or two here and there.

Whatever level our structures are concentrated at, I do think we need to make them as efficient as possible. More efficient structures would be an embodiment of our Quaker testimony to simplicity, and would be more appealing for people to serve within.

On a more pragmatic note, the current 'Valiant 60-and-olders' who are the powerhouse of today's Religious Society of Friends will not be around forever. It is therefore vital that we find ways for younger people to play a more active role.

Think in terms of someone at the start of their career, perhaps with a young family. Do our current structures enable people in this position to contribute without being burdened? I am thinking about



all aspects of service here, from its current focus on full day or residential meetings in London, to our love affair with paper. If one took in all the supplements, *Documents in advance* at a typical Yearly Meeting runs to about 500 sides of A4.

We offer attractive peaceworker internships, but how alluring is our typical committee position? And is our nominations process effective at seeking out new talent?

## Marys, not Marthas

<sup>38</sup>Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house.

<sup>39</sup>And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word.

<sup>40</sup>But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.

<sup>41</sup>And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:

<sup>42</sup>But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.

Luke 10:38-42 (KJV)

I feel that Luke makes an important point. We are in danger of burying ourselves beneath a pile of self-made worry and busyness, when the real answers are to be found in renewing and strengthening our relationship with the divine.

If committed Friends have their weekday evenings and many weekends consumed with business, when will they find time to refill their spiritual reservoirs and grow spiritually?

If we are able to reduce time and 'cumber' spent in committees and administration, the Religious Society of Friends might have more time for Friends to develop their faith in a conscious way. This might build our sense of shared identity in a positive way, increasing our trust in the spirit, and so reducing the need for exhaustive consultation.

The need for spiritual input or nurture during the week just seems an obvious feature of a 'DIY' faith – we have no priests to teach us. And yet we overlook it so often. A Swarthmore lecturer once remarked that if we don't study and prepare ourselves as individuals during the week, meeting for worship becomes like 'Mother Hubbard's cupboard' – those present are all expecting enrichment from the meeting, with little to offer themselves.

We should move away from the mindset where Friends acquire weightiness by piling on committee hats. We should also abolish the constant conjunction of newly-acquired membership and being 'nobbled' by nominations committees. What message does it send to see newcomers if they are seen as mere 'fresh blood' for stolid committees?

Rather we should be creating opportunities for Friends to grow in the spirit on a regular basis. We will do our best work together when we have taken time to be in touch with God.

My view is that we should redress the balance of reflection and action. As a body, we should encourage a culture where growing in the spirit is not just achieved by transacting Quaker business, but by taking time to worship, pray and study together in small groups.

I have had very positive experiences with an informal Friendly Bible Study group in London. A group of no more than eight young Friends meet once a fortnight, eating together, then exploring the Bible and other texts, and closing with open prayer. We have all grown spiritually as a result; 'we know each other in that which is eternal' and we have obviously benefitted from discussing deep spiritual questions in a concrete way. I also find this type of spiritual growth tremendously attractive because it has no administrative overhead. Our organisational clutter is limited to agreeing whose house to meet at next time.

I feel strongly that if more Friends were able to meet together in this way, we would be greatly enriched as a community. Ministry in meetings would have extra depth, beliefs and experiences we share would be clearer and more meaningful. We would be preparing ourselves to worship better together, and to act more effectively in the world.

## The wider context

It should be noted that although the Religious Society of Friends takes some pride in not being swayed by 'wordly fashions', we do live in a wider context which influences who we are, and how we can best put our beliefs into practice. I will now look at some aspects of the context faced by the Religious Society of Friends over the decades to come.

In terms of beliefs, we're in danger of becoming the 'meat in the sandwich' between ever-more-strident secularism on the one hand, and rigid religion on the other.

At an intellectual level, secularism and humanism has acquired great force, and seems well established in the project of labeling faith-based beliefs as always misguided and often damaging. On the other hand, religious groups who retain a 'life and death' view of their beliefs are seen as extreme and fundamentalist.

Is there a middle space left which Quakers can safely and meaningfully inhabit?

If so, this could be a great opportunity for us. However, the danger is that we are seen as too vague and permissive to be meaningfully religious, and not rational enough to compete with 'rigorous' God-free philosophies.

In addition to looking for a useful niche of belief, we should also be asking what practical gaps and needs we might meet in modern society.

I feel that a general trend of modern life is that of being overwhelmed with information and options, but short on time and space to reflect on them. As Gandhi said 'there is more to life than increasing its speed'. It is possible that peak oil and global warming will forcibly brake our accelerating lifestyles. However, events such as these will place additional pressures on us, as resources become scarce.

In this context, the space and depth offered by Quaker practice and experience would seem a welcome antidote and source of spiritual energy. The challenge is to find a way of conveying the transforming possibility of Quaker community in a simple way which gets through people's fragmented attention.

A final point to note on outside context is that religion is now as chosen as other aspects of life. For increasing numbers of people, faith is something they choose if it suits them, rather than something they are born into. In this case, there is an even stronger case for confidently and clearly communicating who Quakers are and what we offer.

The notion of religion as choice throws up other difficulties. While your experiences and lifestyle might well influence your choice of faith group, it seems important that your faith group should also ultimately be able to speak through your life. How can we enable people to be transformed by their faith, without putting them off?

We should also be wary of coalescing around superficial loci of identity – here I am thinking of the obvious clichés – *Guardian*-reading, Radio 4-listening, university-educated, left-wing... This kind of commonality of outlook is very comforting, but ultimately stultifying. We are more than a book club!

I feel that among people of my generation, there is a deep desire to recover the simplicity and authenticity which can be threatened by modern life. If we can speak to this condition, the Religious Society of Friends could find fertile ground. But to do this, we need to speak boldly and clearly of the deepest truths we know.

## Conclusion and recommendations

I feel that our most urgent task must be to restore a vital concern for shared spiritual growth. We must become more like Mary, and less like Martha. Examples such as the Bible study group I am part of suggest ways for small groups of Friends to become enriched in the spirit together.

These practices should build our confidence and enable us to share our experiences more coherently, both with each other and with newcomers.

A stronger sense of identity and shared priorities at a profound level will put our decision-making processes on a surer footing. By clearing up anxieties around discernment and who ‘owns’ processes, we will in turn need less time to put our beliefs and concerns into action.

Our worship and approach to revelation and truth is rightly viewed as ‘clutter-free’. Our other practices and structures should also be as direct as possible. By decluttering I mean a radical sweep, not the gentle dusting of RECAST.

We should become clearer about our offer: a tested, deep, life-transforming space, or *a communal search for something beyond our individual human experiences, which when experienced together directly, transforms and directs our lives into a positive, loving force for good in the world.*

A famous Irish saying (often uttered to those seeking directions in a strange place) is ‘I wouldn’t start from here’. We should be bold enough to ask ourselves how we might build the Religious Society of Friends were we to start again from scratch. This goes back to the simple-as-possible Bible study group, and the idea of properly reviewing our national structures.

If we are to recapture the passion of early Friends, we should start by asking the bold questions. What is God calling us to do in our time? Our shared structures do much to hold and test our discernment. Let's ensure that they don't stifle our calling.

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