

The Future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain

Some personal observations and queries from a new Friend

Introduction

This is a brief and partial exposition of the past, present and future of the peculiar people of God known as the Quakers. It is offered for the discomfort and comfort of Friends.

I am a birthright sceptic whose spiritual journey has brought me accidentally home – convinced that Quakerism is the way that I have sought for so long.

This analysis is based upon 8 months of participation in meetings for worship, visiting other meetings, observation and reading some core texts. It relies on stereotypes and fragments, assumptions and prejudices.

Being so tolerant quiet and inclusive can make it difficult to discern what is so special, powerful and (un)comfortable about the Quaker way of life. There seems to be a substantial tacit agreement on core values paradoxically twinned with a habitual questioning of beliefs or faith. Friends are Seekers – it is important to value what is known and good in order to balance our searching.

Quakerism is dead long live Quakerism.

Quakerism is in decline – or at least the numbers of members and attenders continues to decline. Is the influence or relevance of Quakerism in decline ? **A 12.5% decline in the membership of such a relatively small organisation in 40 years should act as a wake up call.** Is the way of the Light somehow less valuable or relevant than it was ? In the c.17th Quakerism challenged (and its very survival was threatened by) the Church and the State. Our response was the War of the Lamb. What threatens us now – indifference, lack of self-confidence, division, agonising inaction, quietude ? **I DO NOT THINK SO.**

After he wrote his famous essay John Stephenson Rowntree expressed his heartfelt conviction that if Quaker numbers had been maintained as an equivalent proportion of the UK population there would have been **c. 300,000 Quakers in 1860.** He believed that if there had been such numbers then **the worst excesses of the British Empire would have been prevented or massively ameliorated.** What a future that would have been – an even more glorious past to reflect upon now. John Stephenson Rowntree was concerned throughout his life with the challenge his father shared with him – not just the survival of Quakerism but

also the belief that the growth of Quakerism would have a disproportionately positive effect upon humanity and was the God given work of this peculiar people.

The future cannot be predicted – except perhaps by Prophets. For the rest of us it can be envisioned. The future can be created a day at a time by our choices and actions. George Fox and many, many other faithful Friends laid the foundations and culture of the Quaker way of life and questioned and modified Quakerism incessantly. They also built a remarkable body of practice and wisdom - truly a collaboration and contribution from everyone. It is useful to be aware of the past and the present state of Friends to contemplate the future of the Society. To see the future we must look afar and in the right direction – not at our feet, or our navels, or even necessarily at our weaknesses or doubts. **The future of Quakerism is OUR challenge and our duty and our joy. We must look to the Light.**

“Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Trust them as the leadings of God whose Light shows us our darkness and brings us to new life.” (Advices & Queries 1)

Our Spiritual Journeys – Becoming one of Billy Stanley’s Lot

I have found that most Quakers have a genuine interest in the spiritual journeys of others and are willing to share their own. I for one have found this immensely valuable, helpful and influential. As such a new and inexperienced Friend perhaps the main (or maybe the only) contribution I can make is from first impressions, ignorance and the inevitability of asking dumb questions and offering naive suggestions.

I have lived all of my life in the North east of England – although I have travelled and worked in Europe and the USA – there is nowhere else that I would or could call home. I am very happily married with 3 wonderful grown up children and I know that I am blessed – but it was not always so.

My mother is a lovely serene and loving woman – who taught me to pick up spiders - not kill them and to care, above all to care. She also caused me to rebel against her oft repeated phrases “I am content” and “Whatever happened – good or bad - It was meant for a reason”. My father was a silent / jovial man – who taught me to be afraid and much more importantly to question. He accidentally gave me a genetic propensity for depression and anxiety and a consuming sense of humour. I was blessed – but would not be able to understand that reality for quite some time.

Years of illness, living within a self-imposed prison, searching and repeated misdiagnosis was ameliorated primarily by the love and support of my family and friends. Appropriate treatment and learning that one could not always make sense of things, eventually alleviated this suffering. Finding the grace to forgive my father and myself was also of fundamental spiritual and psycho-social importance to me.

I'd been interested by Quakers for a long time – awed by the history, unsure of the commitment. Fortunately, I walked past a Meeting House and saw a sign for Quaker Quest which was to begin the next day. I went along with great trepidation – I didn't want to be converted, I didn't want an epiphany and I probably wasn't good enough anyway.

As I walked through the door which was opened for me and I shook my first Friend's hand I knew my life was about to change. **It was like coming home.** I have heard so many Friends say this. I was made so welcome, everyone was so genuinely pleased to see me – interested and interesting. The testimonies were completely genuine and revealed the Quaker way and Friends – I did not realise then how much effort each testimony must have taken or how revealing it could be. The 30 minutes of silent worship was like nothing I had ever experienced before. I left my first meeting **feeling like the Prodigal – but without the need or offer of forgiveness.** This was big and scary and I knew this one choice had closed down so many others and opened up so many more.

The second Quest meeting I went to a Friend told of how she had become a Quaker after years within the Anglican Church. She had mentioned this to a relative and been told "Oh so you're one of Billy Stanley's lot." She remembered that Billy Stanley was one of the few adults who would take his time to stop and talk to her when she was a young girl. He had always talked to her as an equal and always been interested in her – although she never knew he was a Quaker until then. I never met Billy Stanley – but I felt him touch me. That night was the first time I spoke in meeting and I did not want to – I quaked and I fought against it – then I spoke. I did not speak again for a long time. **But I did know that I was one of Billy Stanley's lot** and that I would never want to be anywhere else.

My only regret is that I did not seek or find Quakers years ago.

Observations / Queries :-

- Most people find Quaker Quest useful.
- Perhaps Quaker Quest is of much more perceived value to newcomers than to existing Friends.
- What would a systematic evaluation of the programme reveal?
- Is Quaker Quest sufficiently accessible – i.e. obviously available?
- Could Quaker Quest "target" specific groups e.g. students?

- Is “recruitment” also about “marketing”?
- Would new attenders benefit from an induction pack / programme?
- Can other events / challenges / essay competitions can provide impetus / focus for Quaker “growth”?

As the months passed I felt more and more a part of the meeting and found it easier to become “gathered”. I enjoyed the company, wisdom and humour of Friends. I did not feel that I could minister because I had nothing important enough to say. But I often felt conflicted about speaking and would get a headache – I did not want to be led or to step forward.

But I often felt *“the evil weakening in me and the good raised up”* (QFP 19:21).

Then over 4-6 weeks several Friends became ill and I realised how much it affected me, how helpful and supportive everyone was and that we were close on many levels. I began to understand that Quakerism was naturally about really taking loving responsibility for our meeting and for each other’s welfare. Holding these Friends and others that I care for up to the Light enabled me to more deeply understand what Quakers and meeting for worship was really about for me and for them. Weekly meeting for worship is now the core around which my spiritual being revolves. **Ministry is an immensely important aspect of this way of life** – and now occasionally I can speak – but mostly I am helped by what others say.

It is difficult to explain what it is like to be part of silent worship. Talking to others about the core values and principles of Quakerism is straightforward but explaining one’s personal experience of this way of life is perhaps beyond explanation. The sense of belonging, of community, awe, joy, peace – whatever, has to be experienced. It can be challenging on many levels. **For me, and I imagine for most of us, the core of Quakerism is here in meeting for worship.**

When the essay competition was mentioned in meeting it was greeted with indignation, mirth, debate – a prize for the under 35s – 35 must be the new 25 Etc. etc. It seemed to me that the process of producing an essay would offer the opportunity for learning and collaboration that I needed – a focus for the next part of my own journey.

Research – Core texts and inspiration

It would be very difficult for me to express how much I have gained from the reading and re-reading of the following texts. It has felt that the care and wisdom of Friends has been offered freely to me. The combined written resources of Quakerism must inevitably be of immense and continuing value to Friends and to others.

Advices and Queries

“Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with the measure of light which is pure and holy, may be guided; and so in the light walking and abiding, these may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.”

Postscript to an epistle to 'the brethren in the north' issued by a meeting of elders at Balby, 1656

This concise comforting and challenging pamphlet comes with a health warning – “Thou shalt decide for thyself” This approach is so powerfully even-handed and cautious that it really made me think about everything that I have subsequently read in a new light.

It also expresses again and again the central dissenting, questioning and seeking tendency of Quakerism.

“5. Appreciate that doubt and questioning can also lead to spiritual growth and to a greater awareness of the Light that is in us all.”

“17. Think it possible that you may be mistaken”

Jacob Bronowski at the end of “The Ascent of Man” stands in a pool of the ashes of the dead in Auschwitz (where some his own family were murdered) and speaks of the fundamental value and importance of doubt.

“It is said that science will dehumanize people and turn them into numbers. That is false, tragically false. Look for yourself. This is the concentration camp and crematorium at Auschwitz, this is where people were turned into numbers. Into this pond were flushed the ashes of four million people. And that was not done by gas. It was done by arrogance. It was done by dogma. It was done by ignorance. When people believe that they have absolute knowledge, with no test in reality, this is how they behave. This is what men do when they aspire to the knowledge of gods.

Science is a very human form of knowledge. We are always at the brink of the known, we always feel forward for what is to be hoped. Every judgment in science stands on the edge or error, and is personal. Science is a tribute to what we can know although we are fallible. In the end the words were said by Oliver Cromwell: "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken."

... We have to cure ourselves of the itch for absolute knowledge and power. We have to close the distance between the push-button order and the human act. We have to touch people."

Paradoxically, it also seems to me that as Quakers we need to proclaim those things which we know to be true. Finding the balance between doubt and certainty, contemplation and action may best be discovered through praxis.

"27. Live adventurously. When choices arise, do you take the way that offers the fullest opportunity for the use of your gifts in the service of God and the community? Let your life speak. When decisions have to be made, are you ready to join with others in seeking cleanness, asking for God's guidance and offering counsel to one another?"

Observations / Queries:-

- The briefest clearest most accessible exposition of Quakerism?
- A work of abiding value and wisdom.
- Used by many as the inspiration for ministry and reflection.
- Almost unknown outside Friends?
- I have given the pamphlet to anyone who has asked me about Friends – perhaps we should leave copies in public places as random acts of kindness?

Quaker Faith and Practice

THE Handbook – enquire within about anything. Browse, search, read from cover to cover – inquire at random. A collection of remarkable and moving insights into the testimonies, history and culture of the Society and its people.

"18:18 Testimony concerning Annie Morris (1900-1980):

Annie and Edward Morris shared the common lot of many Lancashire people - hardship and poverty. [After Edward died in about 1950 Annie] went back to the mill to work once again at the job she knew so well - weaving...

About this time Westhoughton Meeting sharply declined in numbers. As her contemporaries died one by one, eventually Annie Morris remained as the only active member of Westhoughton Meeting, and for thirty years she served as an overseer. Although suffering from rheumatoid arthritis, Annie Morris took upon her frail shoulders the responsibility of maintaining the life of the meeting. It was a great sadness to her, not only to see the decline of the meeting but the decay of the meeting house. As months and years passed, the meeting house became unsafe, but Annie, although in poor health, continued to hold meeting for worship alone. This was a time of great sadness but she remained invincibly faithful to her belief in the goodness of God.

Eventually, first one and then another joined Annie in meeting for worship in the cold damp meeting house. Soon there were about ten people attending...

She died on the 14th September 1980. She had been attending Westhoughton Meeting for more than seventy years - a faithful Friend.

We thank God for the lovely, faithful, tender spirit that was Annie Morris."

Hardshaw East Monthly Meeting, 1980

Examples of the faith, bravery, philanthropy, doubts and questioning of so many Friends lie within the pages of Quaker Faith and Practice. Details of Sufferings and the contributions of Friends shine from these pages. It is impossible not to be humbled and inspired by its contents.

Observations / Queries :-

- The Quaker handbook?
- A work of abiding value and wisdom.
- Used by many as the inspiration for ministry and reflection.
- Almost unknown outside of Friends?
- How many Friends own a copy?
- Should new or prospective Friends be given a copy?

The Journal of George Fox

A revealing account by George Fox and various helpers of the birth of Quakerism. He leaps from the pages – a fearless prophet, revolutionary genius, with a phenomenal grasp of the Scriptures. Immensely energetic, charismatic, troubled and unique, he is equally at home with beggars, prisoners, Cromwell or King Charles; inspiring such devotion in his followers that they were prepared to give themselves up for imprisonment in his stead. He convinced others by his ministry and example to become Quakers. Prepared to suffer and if necessary die for every article of his faith. He was also humble, meek and much loved – as William Penn observed:-

“Many sons have done virtuously in this day, but dear George thou excellest them all”

He fought tirelessly for his God railing against tithes, steeple houses, professors and corruption in order to proclaim the living Truth to all men. With the help of many others he laid the religious, moral and organisational foundations of the Society. Everyone is familiar with the much loved *“walk cheerfully over the world answering that of God in everyone.”* But immediately before this he entreats:-

“Keep in the wisdom of God that spreads over all the earth, the wisdom of the creation, that is pure. Live in it; that is the word of the Lord God to you all, do not abuse it; and keep down and low; and take heed of false joys that will change.” “So the ministers of the Spirit must minister to the spirit that is transgressed and in prison, which hath been in captivity in every one; whereby with the same spirit people must be led out of captivity up to God, the Father of spirits, and do service to him and have unity with him, with the scriptures and one with another. And this is the word of the Lord God to you all, and a charge to you all in the presence of the living God, be patterns, be examples etc.”

Is this uncomfortable in its longer context for many Friends because of the language of its time and its challenge? Fox’s concern was that the core faith and purpose of Quakerism would not be diminished or subsumed.

We must adapt and change and this ability to continue to evolve whilst avoiding schisms is one of the Society’s greatest strengths. However, if we are looking for a prophetic voice – whose example and messages can be of value in envisioning our future, we can still learn much from the illuminating words and example of George Fox.

John Stephenson Rowntree – His Life and Work

John Stephenson Rowntree was a man who truly loved the Society and worked tirelessly for its welfare. He was passionate about the need to adapt and reform in order to adjust to changing circumstances – without compromising its core values and principles. I am sure that many aspects of his analysis in his essay still have relevance today.

To the late William Thistlethwaite he wrote :-

24 / 2 / 1860

“It is beyond the range of human capacity adequately to estimate the amount of happiness that might have been conferred on mankind had the Society of Friends maintained the numerical position it held in 1680. Its numbers would now have exceeded 300,000

What influence would not such a body have exercised on the government of England ! Can we overestimate the reproach that has been brought on the Christian name by the selfish cruelty of Englishmen in heathen lands ? Leaving slavery out of the question, I take it that the unrighteous doings of the strong white men towards the weak aborigines of America, of Kaffir land, of Polynesia, of India and of China, are among the foulest modern blots on England’s escutcheon. Could the Opium Trade have been nursed into its present proportions, could the Indian and Chinese Wars ever have been perpetrated, had a quarter of a million true-hearted Friends lived in England ? Such considerations convince me that it need be in no spirit of partisanship or mere sectarian narrowness, that we ask, even earnestly, what are the remedies for the present state of the Society of Friends.”

.....

We cannot believe that the Head of the Church is less willing than formerly to dispense the gifts and graces of His Holy Spirit.”

.....

A vision had been given to him of what Friends might have been – of what they may yet be; and it was a vision he never forgot. (p16-17)

Early Friends “had done a really far greater work than found a small denomination”. They had grasped eternal principles of religious liberty and social justice and brotherhood, and by courageously trying various “holy experiments,” in applying their principles to the working of human institutions and the actual affairs of men, they had set in motion ever widening

circles of influence and power. "An historian like Bancroft," John Stephenson Rowntree reminded his audience, "sees that the independence of the United States was the natural outcome of the foundation of New England and Pennsylvania." (p.63-64)

Rowntree identified the following key points in his analysis which still have relevance:-

- The central Importance of the gift of prophecy – a lack of sufficient vocal ministry being indicative (even a predictor) of the decline of a meeting.
- The need for younger ministers.
- The importance of visiting ministers.
- The need for the ongoing organisation, participation and support of meetings – an inevitable feature of the refusal of sacerdotal provision or dependence which is a central principle of Quakerism.
- **The need for an appropriate sense of a great heritage and a high purpose.**

"His lectures (at Sacrborough Summer School) set forth what was almost his lifelong theme, the responsibility which rests upon every Church to proclaim its message to the world; that great thought that no Christian community exists for itself, but is entrusted with a mission which it is bound and honoured to fulfil." (p.64)

His essay and his work were instrumental in bringing about many of the changes that sustain the Society today. He also had a practical approach to envisioning change.

"The best way to deal with things as they are is to see them as they ought to be." (p.17)

Visiting Meetings – How much we share

I visited meetings in Alderney, Stocksfield, Sunderland and Windermere. I was always welcomed with warmth, generosity and genuine interest. Each time it was like coming home (albeit to a slightly different one). I was always asked about my spiritual journey, offered hospitality and asked to sign a visitors' book. Each meeting was different and my experience at each was worthwhile, enlightening and joyful. I met a lot of Seekers and no complacency.

Observations / Queries:-

- Playing music before the start of meeting may be useful.
- A rota of people to take responsibility for providing a reading shortly after the start of meeting can encourage vocal ministry.
- A discussion immediately after meeting for worship may be very powerful – whether or not it is inspired by ministry from the meeting.
- How do we share differences, learnings, tips and tricks – or is that something that support groups do not Quakers?
- What is the average age of Quakers?
- The Kendal Meeting Room, Tapestry and Tea Room are a fantastic experience / project – long may it continue. What other “visible_ public_ overtly_ Quaker” projects are out there?
- **We DEFINITELY need more young Quakers (<25 years old).**

What we share?

The Society of Friends has somehow managed to adapt to changing circumstances, historical events and doctrinal challenges. Its methods of business, forms of worship and ability to tolerate and celebrate diversity have enabled its survival. The thrust of much of John Stephenson Rowntree's essay was that some of these adaptations / mechanisms proved to be inappropriate, sapped vitality and had encouraged quietude and decline.

Quakers participate actively within (and outwith) the Society for numerous individual and corporate reasons. Continuing involvement must also imply that we perceive some things of value in the Quaker way of life – or at worst is it “merely” a comfortable habit?

So what do we all value and share?

- Silent worship?
- Shared responsibility for the meeting and its welfare?
- The recognition of the Light in everyone – we value every person?
- We respect, tolerate and welcome diversity?
- The desire to leave the world a better place than we found it?

I'm not sure that I can answer this question for myself, let alone anyone else. I am trying to figure out what being a Quaker means and I know it helps me to try to be better than I am. Somehow, fundamentally, it seems to be about Light and Love.

Now I send urgent action letters on behalf of Amnesty International – before Quakers I always meant to but somehow never got round to it.

Now I write to a prisoner on Death Row – for years I had only thought about it.

So for me the Society both challenges me to question, learn and seek **BUT also to ACT**.

So what should we be doing to create the future that we want for the Society of Friends?

Creating the Future – suggestions for the next 300 years

There can be no doubt that the practical actions and contributions of Friends have already, and continue, to make a diverse and positive contribution to society in so many ways. I believe that what is needed is a focusing of attention and resource on a small number of key areas. **What is our purpose?**

Objectives:

1. Survival – implies that we replace Friends at least at the same rate that we lose them or the Society will eventually disappear.

2. Influence – to have an increasingly positive impact upon humanity and our world.

Both of these suggest other imperatives – e.g. sustainability and stewardship, along with keeping that which is of particular value and which makes the Quaker way and the Society of Friends what it is. Nobody would desire growth and survival in a way which compromised our integrity or our own individual principles or faith.

It seems to me that Quakers have been remarkably successful at addressing all of these issues **BUT we do not appear to be good at:-**

- Growing our membership
- Blowing our own trumpets
- Attracting “young” people in anything like sufficient numbers
- Explaining the value of what we have to offer and of who we are
- Focussing our attention / resources on a single issue or objective (e.g. our survival)

Maybe all of these things are inherently incompatible with Quakerism or aspects of our Quakerism or are too uncomfortable?

Whatever the challenges most of us would face in addressing the issues of survival and influence, **they are minor compared to the sufferings which past generations of Quakers endured for their faith and for us.**

Actions

Make the survival and growth of the Society our FIRST priority

- **Market Quakerism (ethically, effectively, energetically)**
 - Make more information more easily available and accessible
 - Promote Quaker Quest and other forms of recruitment
 - Focus attention on target groups e.g. University Students
 - Focus more attention and resources on Schools and young people
- **Bear witness – be known as Quakers in our communities**
- **Increase the support for Meetings**
 - Encourage / support / increase visiting ministry
 - Encourage more vocal ministry

Focus on 100 year projects – i.e. things beyond our lifetime.

For example:-

- The wellbeing of our great grandchildren
- Long term institutions – e.g. Quaker Schools / Universities
- Utilise the emerging science of Positive Psychology to enhance our Testimonies
- Slavery
- Conflict resolution and avoidance
- Education
- Bursaries for apprenticeships or
- Bequests
- Works of Art and beauty
- Global warming
- Quaker media, Quaker publications, Quaker Television, Quaker Radio ;-)

CONCLUSION

“Therefore, dear Friends, wait in the Light, that the Word of the Lord may dwell plentifully in you.”

William Dewsbury, 1675 (QFP 29:19)

The Religious Society of Friends is of immense value to its members and is an agent for positive change in the world.

We MUST pay sufficient attention and a portion of our resources to sustaining the Religious Society of Friends and the Quaker way of life, or else, Thomas Hancock’s prediction of the inevitable and predictable demise of the Society will come about.

The countless testimonies of faithful lives have brought us to this point. The past which John Stephenson Rowntree looked back upon when he wrote his essay was a proud (if one is allowed to use the term) and positively influential one. He was convinced – as am I – that the impact of a stronger, larger Society of Friends would have been considerably more valuable than we can imagine.

The reading of any book on Quakers cannot fail to impress upon us how one committed person can make a positive difference in seemingly small (as well as large ways). The impact of a Gandhi, a Hitler, a Martin Luther King, a Stalin or a George Fox is historically apparent. The impact of the Billy Stanley’s or Annie Morris’s of this world is incalculable – I fundamentally believe that our world is richer for every one of them – and we need to find and encourage more of them.

The world and its peoples need the wisdom, care and attention of the peculiar people of God more now than ever before. The ongoing and growing influence of fundamentalisms, intolerance, exclusion and persecution demand loving and generous attention that embraces and encourages diversity of thought, faith and action.

The future of Quakerism is our responsibility – we hold it in trust. We need to make what is good visible. We need to be prepared to proclaim what is good and to tell the world who we are and why we are here.

“The best way to deal with things as they are is to see them as they ought to be.” (p.17 JSR)

