

Light and the Prism; prospects for a new history for British Friends.

Introduction

In part one I give a personal account of how I arrived at an awareness of Friends, of my local meeting set in a world-wide numerical and theological context. Part two the question of numerical strength and spiritual vigour is set against the history of theological change. Then in part three I go on to consider the current 'liberal predicament' that tries to balance 'intellectual integrity' with the 'religious' in spiritual life. Final sections consider the prospect of spiritual renewal and a history of the liberal tradition, concluding with an analogy of the 'Light and the Prism'.

Part 1. An emerging awareness

In developing a sense of British Friends and their place in the world

The most classic questions that reside at the centre of religious minded people are often personal ones; Who am I?, Where have I come from? Where am I going? When these queries lead to association of like minded people, a shift can occur from the personal to the corporate, to become- *Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?* Thus intertwined with our identity as Friends, is the growing concern for 'renewal'. A concern that itself evolves with the changing perspectives of local to area, and of Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) to yearly meetings around the world.

The development and awareness from the parochial 'I', to the wider 'We', is not automatic, or at least not in my case. In retrospect it is unsurprising to me that after a year or two of becoming an attender, I suffered a shock. I discovered that these tolerant, open and essentially liberal Friends I was associating with, could not be assumed to describe Friends world-wide. A revelation that came via a worship- sharing discussion group on the publication 'Who We Are; Questions of Quaker Identity' (Quaker Home Service and Woodbrooke, 1995).

Moreover after reading Alistair Herons' 'The Future of British Quakers' (2004) It appeared that I was also typical of the 'congregationalist' tendency, that is an exclusive identification with one's local meeting over that of area and yearly meeting, and be afflicted by-

"...a lack of positive interest in the life of the yearly meeting as a whole, including its overall numerical strength and spiritual vigour".

So began a part- time, self- education project, into the history and present nature of those peculiar folk called Quakers. Eventually, and In spite of Groucho Marx's famous dictum, transposed as a warning- 'never to join any club that would have me as a member', I overcame my sense of unworthiness and joined. Becoming a member puzzled a few of my attender friends. Set in their attendership, it seemed I had betrayed something understood between us. This something was in the order that 'membership' for a variety of reasons, was to be held at arms length, not embraced. A factor that continues to press on the issue of low take-up of membership by attenders, a critical topic I will return to.

A further revelation from 'Questions of Quaker Identity' (QQID) was the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) and their particularly striking data for the numerical spread of Friends throughout the world. As recently reported from the FWCC statistics of world-wide membership, Africa section has 43%; Americas 47%; Asia West Pacific 4%; and Europe and Middle East 6% of which British Yearly Meeting is by far the largest part of this section. This reported in 'Epistles & Testimonies'-from the 2009 Yearly Meeting Proceedings, under the theme; '*...diversity of Friends, different branches from the same root*'. Clearly the branch of the parent root is now dwarfed by the great boughs of Africa and the Americas.

It was also a little unsettling to find out that my local meeting is also a global minority insofar that it is a part of the 'un-programmed' tradition. The programmed tradition with its features of hymns, sermons, with a smaller period of time set aside for silent worship, struck me as non-traditional even anathema to my fledgling sense of what is quintessentially 'Quaker'. While

others in the un-programmed tradition might agree, the FWCC figures show we are only 11% of world wide membership, whereas programmed meetings are 49% and evangelical Friends 40% . The latter statistic being all the more impressive by the fact it is an underestimate as many evangelical Friends are non-affiliated to the FWCC.

From this picture there is sense of British Friends contained in an *enclave* within the world wide fellowship of Friends. How many ordinary Friends reflect on such matters is largely unknown, but if Heron is right a 'congregationalist' attitude may prevail that is largely unaware of the present predicament. I shall also argue that a number of lines of influence that are likely to impact on the future of British Friends must include those majorities reported above.

Moreover within our corporate identity as part of an un-programmed tradition we have an essentially 'liberal' flavour of theology. While Quaker history shows this was not always the case, the situation for liberal theology today is as some sociologists of religion have noted is one of numerical decline for denominations on both sides of the Atlantic (Berger et al).

John Punshon as a noted and influential Quaker historian, also reflects this point in a striking way through his position made in an article in the Friends Quarterly (October 2003 Vol. No.33, No.8) 'The Word Made Flesh' he states;

"liberal theological principles (which) are often unquestionably assumed to be of definitive of Quakerism. This is not the case, however, for most of the Friends in the world are in fact evangelical Christians...my conclusion is that liberal theology now speaks to a world that is passing, and in the emerging world it is orthodox religion that will flourish, because of its clarity and precision".

Additionally, in the 2006 edition of his Quaker history 'Portrait in Grey' his final chapter looks to the future of religion in Europe and insists the future theological shape of Friends will ultimately rest with the fate of liberalism and evangelism in the wider global religious scene (p.296).

Presently for evangelist Friends the growth area is Latin America and Africa (particularly Kenya) thanks to the evangelical tradition of American Friends who sent missionaries to both regions in the early 20th century. These regions now contain flourishing independent Yearly Meetings, and as Ben pink Dandelion notes, this is shifting the locus of Quaker influence from the developed world of the UK and the USA, to South America and sub Sahara Africa. By contrast, the growth for evangelical Friends in the US has halted. (Pink Dandelion, 'The Quakers' p.116). It is also noteworthy that several protestant pentacostal and evangelical churches are also resurgent in the developed world but not so dramatically as in the developing one. For example;

"The Christian congregation in Africa has grown by more than 4,300% since 1900 - a rate of expansion unknown since the earliest years of the Church. There are about 390 million practising Christians in Africa today, more than three times as many as in 1970. Over the next 20 years, this figure is expected to grow by a further 200 million."
(BBC homepage; 'QI-Quite Interesting' web site (13.10.09)

By contrast, while America is noted as being more religious, Britain reflects North West Europe in its secularity and thus, like Europe may be increasingly 'stony ground' for religious growth. On the other hand, others may also point to the urban resurgence of pentacostal and charismatic churches in the West, but it is a complex picture as characterised below;

"With over 170 distinct religions counted in the 2001 Census, the religious make-up of the UK is diverse, complex, multicultural and surprising. Less than half of the British people believe in a God, yet about 72% told the 2001 census that they were Christian, and 66% of the population have no actual connection to any religion or church, despite what they tend to write down on official forms. Between 1979 and 2005, half of all Christians stopped going to church on a Sunday.

Religion in Britain has suffered an immense decline since the 1950s, and all indicators show a continued secularisation of British society in line with other European countries such as France."
(Religion in the United Kingdom, Diversity, Trends and Decline: Vexen Crabtree 2007)

From this complex of sociological trends, plurality of spiritual expressions and diversity of beliefs, come the question for the survival of UK Friends, its corporate prospects in the two theologies evangelism and liberalism, and the possibility of one proselytising the other.

If we in our congregational mind set are not aware of our position in the pond, then there is a need to highlight the issues Heron prioritised for numerical strength and spiritual vigour. A need made more urgent perhaps by the national cultural trends for religion in the UK, that pose a sharp question for all corporate religions. For Quakers in Britain, this translates as how far or how much longer can the Religious Society of Friends in the UK, maintain a religious identity?

All these questions point to the nature of the liberal theological project, its history and the story of its present embodiment among British Friends. Liberalism's weaknesses and potential insofar as it may be able to sustain hope for corporate 'renewal', will be the discussion under Heron's priority of spiritual vigour. But firstly I turn to the somewhat vexing question of numerical strength, after the following cautionary note;

"The good Christian should beware the mathematician and all those who make empty prophecies. The danger already exists that the mathematicians have made a covenant with the devil to darken the spirit and to confine man in the bonds of hell." (ST AUGUSTINE (354-430 cited on Q!)).

Part 2. Embracing the story of change

The uses of history

With the above caveat in mind, it is perhaps inevitable that numerical decline is never a comfortable fact to deal with, especially when one identifies with the thing declining. Having a good part of myself invested in Friends, it was another unsettling revelation for me to discover that the numerical strength of British Friends, particularly for members, is weakening. Some small comfort perhaps in the historic fact that this occurred before. In 1859, John Stephenson's essay '*Quakerism Past and Present*' noted a gradual decline in numbers from an estimated 35,000 to 60,000 in 1680, to around 20,000 by the turn of the 19th century. In 1860, by the newly introduced tabular statement, membership stood at 13,859, a numerical nadir, but nevertheless one from which the Society gradually recovered.

Following the changes brought about from Stephenson's analysis, and also the renewal after the 1895 Manchester conference, membership numbers gradually increased through the remainder of the 19th and on through the twentieth century to reach a high point of around 19,000 adult members in 1974. Since 1965 when the range stayed in the 18,000s for 11 years, then from 1980 the range was in the 17000s for 17 years to 1997. More recently between 1997 and 2001 it took only five years to drop to 16,000 and fell again to around 15,000 over the years 2002 to 2006. (Tabular Statements and BYM membership statistics from 1935 until 2008).

It is clear that decline has accelerated since 1996. Over the ensuing ten years, BYM has suffered a loss of around a thousand Friends every five years. At the current trend the record low of 1860 (13,859), will be broken before the 2012 Olympics.

One thing not evident in the above frame is that while the British population has grown dramatically over the last 350 years, the proportion of Quakers to the general population has shrunk massively. John Stephenson in his prize winning essay noted that in 1680, at the zenith of numerical strength, the proportion of Friends to the general population was 1:130;

one Friend for every hundred and thirty English citizens. A hundred and seventy six years later, in 1856, he recorded that this had decreased to 1 in every 1100 of the general population. Now, a further hundred and fifty three years on, the proportion is (by my calculations) around 1:4200. So while over the history of Friends, the host population has soared, the 'median' of membership numbers has remained relatively static.

Another take on these statistics is to calculate the annual rate of decline for the two periods of numerical loss. The first, taking the most conservative estimate of 35,000 Quakers in 1680, to John Rowntree's estimate to around 20,000 in 1800, is an annual rate of loss of 125 Friends. In the period 1800 to 1860, the rate of loss slowed to 100 per annum, and ended a 180 year long slope of numerical decline. From the 1860 figure of around 14,000 to the 1953 twentieth century high point figure of some 22,000, was an annual increase of 86 Friends per annum over a period of ninety-three years.

The second period of numerical loss ranges over a period of 55 years from 1953 to 2008. This second period sees a record decline at rate of 134 Friends per annum.

I give these figures in some detail in the hope that as a tool of history, the time-line of numerical change can be a framework in which to pose questions that have relevance and make sensible the story behind the numbers. The second subject of Heron's priority is the question of 'spiritual vigour' and by implication, what might be the relationship with numerical decline. Below I offer a framework, drawing on Quaker scholarship, that hopefully embeds the question of spiritual vigour in a more historical context from which the future of British Friends may be sensed.

An outline of theological change

Ben Pink Dandelion in QQID (Booklet A, page 8) gives a brief outline of six theological periods, progressing from the founders to the present day. The descriptions of the periods offered below are my own paraphrasing and emphasis, much abbreviated from Pink Dandelions' exposition. The estimates for dates and numbers for each period are also essentially from my calculations:

Stage 1/ 'Early Enthusiasms' (Fox's early ministry, through the Civil War and up to 1661)

The idea of the 'Inward Light' being central to Fox's message that was a clearly different from the Christianity of the 17th century orthodox teaching. Expressions of the early Friends' spirituality were dramatic and controversial, even to later Friends as we shall see.

Stage 2/ 'Restoration Quakerism' (1661 to 1680; estimates of Quakers 35,000 to 60,000)

The drawing back of enthusiasm by Fox in favour of organisation and political consolidation with the restored monarchy. With the backdrop of persecution, the "authority of the collective took precedence over the authority of individual experience"

Stage 3/ 'Quietism' (1680 to 1830; numbers in steady decline to around 20,000 in 1800)

John Punshon describes this as "a personal, private and retiring form of religion" that disavowed the 'Lamb's War' of the founders. Characterised by an insistence on the iconic 'peculiarities'-dubbed as a 'silly doctrine' by Margaret Fell

Stage 4/ 'Evangelism' (1830 to around 1905; from the low of 1860, numbers gradually rise to around 17,000 in 1900)

Scripture becomes paramount and the Inward light de-emphasised, and salvation seen more in terms of the Wesleyan view of justification and sanctification through good works.

Stage 5/ 'Liberal Theology' (1895 to around 1960; membership figures fairly stable around 17,000)

The watershed of the Manchester Conference of 1895, in which Darwin, Biblical criticism, and

other aspects of liberal theology were accepted including a re-emphasis on the Inward Light.

Stage 6/ 'Liberal-Liberal Theology' (Roughly 1960 to present day, membership achieves a 20th century high- point in 1953 (22,500), then drops to under 15,000 in 2008)

The present stage, in which the influence of Christianity wanes, and 'experimental' forms of spirituality are embraced.

What is interesting is the relatively short period of the Early Enthusiasts and the Restoration compared with the succeeding theological stages to the present day. The first two stages can be likened to an explosion followed by a controlling action over some 35 years (from 1648, Fox begins to make an impression) to 1680. The subsequent stages- *quietism*, *evangelism* and *liberalism* (including the liberal-liberal) each lasted approximately a century.

If the founders were on fire, then the phase of the Quietists is a dampening down that was followed by another heating-up, a new 'enthusiasm' sourced from Wesleyan evangelism. Subsequently the 'chill' winds of the intellectual Enlightenment precede the Liberal phases, that have now lasted over a century among British Friends.

Reduced to an admittedly dubious simplicity, if the Enthusiasts (and restoration) and the Evangelicals are 'hot' and the Quietists and the Liberal phases 'cold', the six stages of Dandelion's formulation is distilled to follow an alternating pattern of *hot-cold-hot-cold*.

In the Quaker theological changes, there is a implied process of an 'inter phase' process in the form of a reaction of one to the other, of a progressing pattern of the new to the old. The quietists judge the founders with excessive enthusiasm, and so the evangelical to the quietist for not being enthusiastic enough. Then onto the liberal to the evangelical for being too doctrinal. Now in turn we appear to be seeing, through Punshon and other Quaker critics, a reaction of some sort to the present liberal-liberal 'cold' phase. These may be summarised as ideas of 'post liberalism' and 'neo orthodoxy', but they also point to Heron's question of 'spiritual vigour'.

The liberal predicament uncovered

From this this brief assessment, it may be fair to say that the present situation is that of a 'liberal predicament'. Globally speaking we may feel justified in our enclave, but from the above picture, there is a suggestion of some sort of theological 'engagement' to come, perhaps sooner than later. Maybe one of the signs are the on-going discussions in the 'Friend' over whether or not, we are or should be, essentially Christian, suggesting a predicament between a stance of rational integrity that makes difficult maintaining a faith in a criticised Christianity.

Additionally a possible link between the recent accelerated decline, and that of a Britain becoming more secular, as increasingly more Friends begin to nudge the upper age limit for an increased life expectancy.

There is also the past tendency of Friends to take a passive attitude to enquirers. Alistair Heron sees this as a 'survival' from what John Stephenson in 1859 observed in the quietist attitude to "let the seeker move at her/his own pace" backed-up with platitudes such as "We are not a proselytising people; Our condition results from individual unfaithfulness; Numbers are not a correct test of strength".

Christian critics of the liberal tradition tend to take this view. Martin Davie in QQID (Booklet A: p.47), asserts that liberal Christianity "is halfway to no Christianity at all" and bemoans the attempt by those such as the Quaker Universalist Group to side-step the agenda of early Friends. From the goal to revive "primitive Christianity" instead to make the Society more amenable to those "of all faiths or none".

A further view, this time from a minority (0.03% world wide membership) of 'conservative' Friends in the USA -

"...who feel they are closer to the original guiding principles of George Fox and that many of us in Britain have lost our connection to the roots of Quakerism." (BYM Proceedings 2009)

How to think about such observations- are they judgements from a biased perspective, or part of a relevant analysis? There is the saying that one should keep ones friends close, but enemies closer, because they are more likely to tell you uncomfortable truths you ought to know.

Clarity and precision however, are not necessarily correlates to 'truth' that appeal to everybody. For many of the liberal tradition, there is an anathema to the idea of doctrinal and creedal revision. But the liberal predicament is poised on the question of maintaining intellectual integrity (e.g. Biblical criticism) that parallels a loss of the essentially 'religious' world- view.

To explore how this situation has come about, it might be helpful to peruse a brief overview of the liberal tradition that is still emblematic of British Friends today.

The liberal theological tradition; A brief selective history

Peter Berger charts the rise of liberal theology from the impetus of Friedrich Schleiermacher's '*Addresses on Religion to its Cultural Despisers*' (1799) (cited in Bergers 'A Rumour of Angels'). Schleiermacher now dubbed as the 'Father of liberal theology' was a part of an intellectual high society in Prussia, his own circle made up of young Christians and Jews who had rejected religion. These friends could not understand Schleiermacher's defence of religion but such was his popularity that they persuaded him to write the book 'Addresses'.

There is something in this story that is characteristic of the liberal period. As an 'apologetic' treatise Schleiermachers term 'cultured despisers' captured something of the accommodation to the *spirit of the times*. For liberal theology this was to be a constantly moving target, as the *zeitgeist* constantly evolved its' challenges also evoking persistent reaction in the form of neo-orthodoxy and fundamentalism.

Throughout the century that followed, Schleiermacher, was one of several writers that contributed to the rise and dominance of theological liberalism. In Berger's view the "critical concern" of this movement was "a cognitive adjustment of Christianity to the (actual or alleged) world view of modernity" resulting in an evaporation of religious sentiment making 'faith' more intellectually difficult to support. (Berger, 'A Rumour of Angels' p.23).

If Protestant theology had (and arguably continues) to have 'cultured despisers', then by the turn of the twentieth century saw the beginnings of many innovative accounts of the religious and spiritual from 'cultured' thinkers such as William James. Brother of the novelist Henry James, and coming from a impressive intellectual East Coast American family of liberal tendency, James presented the Gifford lectures at Edinburgh in 1901. The lecture series became a book '*The Varieties of Religious Experience*' (1902), that focussed not so much on the theological or that of church history, but on individual spiritual experience from the then radical perspective of psychology.

In one of the lectures he defends George Fox from the then prevalent, medical reductionist judgement of religious enthusiasm as 'pathology'. Psychiatry at that time perhaps a particular example of the 'cultured despisers' of religion. James quotes Fox's journal in describing his visit to the Midlands town of Lichfield. George Fox must have startled the inhabitants with his cry of "Wo to the bloody city of Lichfield". While in context of the 17th century religious turmoil, it is a use of history of the early 20th century critical mind to describe spiritual fervour in terms of a mental instability (James p.30).

In the Quaker expression, the liberal impulse went through the crisis of the two World Wars to 1947, when the agnostic Friend, Henry Cadbury gave the Nobel lecture on behalf the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) when it accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the Society of Friends. The spirit of liberalism through the Peace Testimony perhaps

reflected through the oft quoted UNESCO statement;- *"Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed."*

Here can be seen the emphasis of an altogether more humanist variety, than that of Christian theology and verities (that seemed so impotent in the face of the 20th century world -wars) and instead a turning to principles of "education, science, social science, culture and communication as the means to achieve the ambitious objective of its (UN) founding charter"

By the 1960's when *'Honest to God'* (1963) emerged from the pen of John Robinson, the then Anglican Bishop of Woolwich. the idea of God 'up there' was replaced with one of a more existential nature, a God of the 'Ground of our being'. For Friends today this influence has culminated in the advent of non-theist Friends exemplified in *'Godless for Gods Sake: Nontheism in contemporary Quakerism'* (ed. David Boulton 2006), charting a "rejection of traditional belief in the existence of a transcendent, personal and supernatural God".

Of further 'liberal' influence to Friends were that of Carl Jung and Teilhard de Chardin. In contrast to Freud, Jung emphasised the spiritual aspect in the dynamic of the psyche. Teilhard de Chardin, a Roman Catholic priest, out of favour with the Holy See, with many of his writings. What can be seen as notably liberal and innovative was his idea of a destiny for humankind not in terms of 'God' but as an 'Omega point', an evolutionary process that ends in a point of intelligence that encompasses all knowledge.

It is in this account therefore, that we can see the nature of the 'liberal' as one of both *innovation* and *accommodation* in a dynamic as Perry Williams in QQID (Booklet A: p67), proposes a perspective of Quakerism as something that 'evolves'. He suggests that while 'universal and eternal' meanings and values are contested in liberal theology, *"nevertheless it does allow-indeed it requires-meaning and value to exist in particular times, particular places, particular communities."*

In other words, the liberal impulse in this time, in the UK Fellowship of Friends as it stands in respect to this 'zeitgeist'

And so to the present day situation. What is the context of British culture in which religion in general and Friends in particular exist? A harsh judgement is that It is a culture of ambivalence to religion, together with it's amnesiac stance to history, effectively devaluing the considerable historical capital of Quakerism as a path for a spiritual seeker. It is in the sense of an anticipated new 'dark age' that may be reflected in the W.B. Yeats' line *"The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity."* (The Second Coming, 1920),

In the present times, if the spirit is what the Meeting for Sufferings 'Strategic Framework' insists lie at the heart of all our works, then all theological labels do not capture the complex individual forms of personal faith, the variance of vigour, the crisis of belief and enlightenment from a more 'secular' spiritual discovery. Such 'folk' theologies may be un-chartable, but not it seems in the corporate spirit as enshrined in the belief of the 'Will of God', debatably at the heart of our business meetings. So on the axis of 'Will of God - non Will of God', we may individually and corporately travel along back and forth as we wax and wane in our spiritual fervour.

Interest in modern theological developments, new God language, new ideas of spiritual existence, may go in and out of fashion for Friends and other ordinary people, of all faiths or of none. But there are some who point out that interest in religious matters have all but disappeared among the general population. It may be of no surprise if Friends, as fellow citizens are prone to this influence of cultural ambivalence.

We are in the UK diffuse and complex in our beliefs and understandings of what it means to be 'Quaker'. Ben Pink Dandelion notes the existence of 133,000 evangelical Friends in Kenya, and like Latin America still growing and therefore will be dominant in the discussions ahead of what it means to be A Friend. Given that such evangelical Friends are likely to hold dear the 'Great Commission' -the priority to spread the 'good news' of Christ, then we in Britain must become the object of a ironic turn; that of missionaries from the developing nations returning the compliment of the Western evangelical missions of the 19th century.

For those Friends in the conservative and evangelical tradition an effort to 're-convince' Friends in Britain would be justified on the alleged 'loss of the way' of the liberal. But how would we receive such attentions? If those of us in the liberal tradition can admit to having a subtle and altogether amorphous sense of the spirit, we can also confess the difficulty to communicate (and defend) this. Perhaps British Friends have been somewhat complacent on this issue, and gives warrant to Heron's emphatic claim;- *lack of spiritual challenge*, as one of the main causes of our decline.

If this is all of a piece of the liberal spirit opening up a 'Pandora's box' of change leading from innovation and accommodation to fragmentation, it may be of some prophetic comfort that in the mythology, what was left in the box was 'Hope'.

Hope perhaps in the initiatives of the 'Quaker Quest' and by implication more priority to outreach and signs of a more vigorous assertion of the liberal spirit. Also the hope of a more successful challenge to the tricky issue of promoting the value of Friends as a Religious Society, when the religious content has arguably declined.

But what hope in the constituency of attenders?

The present constituency of attenders

Attenders as a constituency, are the natural group from which replacement of passing members are hoped for. For Alistair Heron in his booklet, 'The Future of British Quakers' the cause of failure to engage attenders into membership is spiritual, or rather a lack of spiritual leadership from the membership. He sees the present trend resulting in the future BYM becoming more of an 'ethical society', and one that is unable to claim a religious basis for its work and witness. The source of new spiritual vigour must "come from a re-discovery of the experience of 'Living in the Light', that would provide a meaningful challenge for attenders to respond to in a 'Spirit-led' way of living, individually and corporately, and our numbers would stabilise or even grow" (Heron 2004, p.13).

This conclusion came from a survey, lead by Heron, in the early nineties of several hundred attenders in the North East, gauging their views on membership. This came out of a concern that the loss of members was increasing faster than could be replaced from the pool of attenders. Among the findings, there was a sense of the differences between members and attenders becoming progressively 'blurred', consequently attenders did not see a clear reason for joining. In this way Heron identified the issue that of 'identity' and the understanding of what is 'Quaker'.

There is a sense (for me through various local initiatives), that the long- standing attenders we have, are as seekers, multi associational e.g. they associate with several issue- led, therapeutic and spiritual organisations and movements. An aspect of rampant pluralism of today that makes many of us perhaps promiscuous in our exploring, and less likely suitors for the 'marriage' of membership. In this therefore, is evidence of a preference for 'spiritual tourism' rather than as apprentice acolytes to the commitment of membership. Of course there are notable exceptions among long-standing attenders, who are highly valued people, much respected and of inestimable support to their local meetings. But generally, the turnover of enquires and particularly short-stay attenders, are from those who can be seen more as consumers than producers of the spirit which they nonetheless value from association with Friends.

To be fair, there are also the pressures of the times, namely the insistence for long hours at the workplace, and for attenders that still have dependent children (more so in the main than for members a generation ahead) are looking for spiritual support rather than church business jobs. Historically, we declined the direction of some yearly meetings in the States to adopt a pastor-lead model. Consequently British Friends became by necessity a DIY organisation with the priesthood of the laity in every aspect of spiritual up-holding as well as exercising a wide variety of necessary administrative skills to up-hold demanding practical tasks. To many attenders, Friends look extremely busy; this aspect is hard to sell without some deep sense of

the meaning of such commitment. All this being the issue of effective communication of 'in-reach' to the attender community.

Part 3. Prospects for a new history

Possibilities for the liberal spirit: From religion to spirituality

So what has happened to the 'spirit' in this present phase of Liberal-Liberal theology? Many Christians would see the idea of the spirit as the 'Holy Spirit' and also what is essentially 'religious' as exclusively Christian. Therefore the loss of religious content among the liberal traditions is co-terminal with the loss of Christian verities. What is left perhaps, is a belief in a 'God' of some order that is not exclusively the ownership of Christian theology. In other words the present stage of the liberal view- point is a turning away from a Christ- centric to more of a God- centric spirituality. Its central problem is to form a clearer understanding of what 'that of God in everyone', is. As Ben pink Dandelion observes in QQID, what it is of 'that' and of 'God' is presently 'up for grabs'.

Further to this, as Heron observes;

"The health and vigour of the Quaker movement will of necessity depend on a fresh up-springing of first hand personal experience. But that will then need to be shared, to be given expression in speech as well as in living." ('Caring Conviction Commitment' 1992 p.62).

In this way, one can see there is a searching for a succinct formulation of a confident 'Quaker voice' in the endeavours of *Quaker Quest*, which, by implication is looking to re-invigorate the status -quo of liberal theology.

If there is a reluctance among Friends to use the 'God language' of 'God', Jesus Christ, Lord and saviour' then in my case, it is very much because such language has been effectively hijacked to mean things that are not of my mind and perhaps also a large part of the British Quaker mind. Who are you to judge the wisdom of God? -would be the response of some Christians. But as Galileo Galilei once asserted to the effect that having been gifted the power of reason by his creator, he could not then believe that the creator did not mean him to use it.

In this line of thinking also the German 19th century historian Leopold von Ranke, who said that 'each age is immediate to God'. For me, this is essence of our ability to rationally investigate the truth of our own age in its particular 'immediacy to God'; an essential part and parcel of the liberal project.

Admittedly a part of that project is in the individual and freethinking tendency to tend one's own spiritual garden, perhaps coming together in some 'allotment' of shared concerns, but too differentiated for any corporate identity. Some also take spirit as the therapeutic in healing groups, and in organising for Friends exposure to the many range of personal development and self- help physical and psychological systems currently on offer.

For others the 'spiritual' is in the association with issue lead groups that cluster around the peace and other testimonies including the idea of stewardship of the planet. What animates us today, what inner fire could be ignited, may depend in part or wholly on the environment. That is the environment of ideas in response to the changing nature of the physical environment, with its cascading impact on the political, global and personal.

Nonetheless, it remains the question; if we are to strive for a new and 'experimental' confession of the spirit, that incorporates a spectrum of expressions of the inward light, what language can convey this?

There was something of the answer in the Swarthmoor lecture of 1973, George Gorman's 'The Amazing Fact of Quaker Worship'. He teased out a sense of a possibility of re-discovery through citing Peter Berger's 'Rumour of Angels'. Among other arguments this book promoted

the idea of 'signals of transcendence' through which 'prototypical human gestures' of hope, play, laughter, even damnation were reflected. Such 'signals' of the divine spark I've felt resonating through ministries in my local meeting.

Berger also tackled head-on the thorny question of 'relativism' one which has recently been of concern to the present Pope. Perhaps rightly so, as there is something of the 'acid' in the drive of relativism so often corrosive of faith. As a product of the sociological imagination and philosophy, relativism enables such questions that Berger formulated as '*Once we know that all human affirmations are subject to scientifically graspable socio-historical processes, which affirmations are true and which are false?*' (Rumour of Angels p.57). In this way religion is an affirmation, a mere product of human history.

The German philosopher, Feuerbach (along with Marx and Freud) asserted religion to be a product of the mind's imagination. A *projection* of its deepest longings. To this, Berger proposes that human consciousness, has an affinity in its structure to the reality of the empirical world. So in terms of spiritual reality, the psychological movements of *projection and reflection* are two sides of the same affinity. In religious history, this ability emerges as reflection of those 'signals of transcendence'. Such signals if sourced from the reality of the divine spirit, remain nonetheless a profound mystery. Perhaps especially so in the proposition that such an entity is external, cosmic and supernatural, and certainly not just the projections of an altogether human longing.

Also as a personal interpretation, Rex Ambler's 'Light to Live By' gives a stance from George Fox's journals of a 'Quaker meditation technique'. The idea of spiritual light as a medium for the divine reality, is a core expression of Quaker belief. The reality of which is tested, through the advent of 'Light Groups' that emerged from Ambler's work. This points to a dynamic among English Friends of several experimentations in perceiving spiritual reality, only possible perhaps, under the umbrella of the liberal tradition.

If the present 'liberal' spirituality among British Friends needs to be slightly hotter, turning the dial from the present 'luke warm' to that of a warmer 'moderate' temperature, who or what is to provide the fuel? The passing generation may not. The present group of attenders? Not their responsibility. Therefore, if we cannot make it a priority for an in-reach re-vision, as with the Quietists of the 18th century, we in the 21st may find an impetus arriving outside that of British Friends

Points of growth; the emerging church movement

Mainly centred in the USA, a movement that promotes a 'conversation' that strides theological boundaries that claims participants who if evangelical are also post-evangelical; if liberal also post-liberal, charismatic and neo-charismatic, who locate themselves as living in a 'post-modern' society. As a movement, it has a on-line community and is the subject of interest and concern from journals such as Christian Post and Religion and Ethics News Weekly.

Of some kinship to Friends in its embracement of a plurality of theologies and modes of worship including that similar to silent worship. It is also a reaction to the organised and institutional, rather it promotes a return from those forms to a 'movement'. Thus it seeks, as do some Friends to re-establish 'primitive' Christianity. If American mainline evangelicals are strident in their propositions, then some of that persuasion within the emerging movement seek a more modest exposition (Wikipedia).

It may be here that the handshake between the liberal and the evangelical may take place, if no other reason than the emerging movement is also one of younger people, less tied to the rigid battle lines of former engagements.

From another angle and cited in the Wikipedia page 'Emerging church', Rowan Williams issued a call to the Church of England that echoed the influence of this movement in Britain:

"We have to ask whether we are capable of moving towards a more 'mixed economy'—recognizing church where it appears and having the willingness and the skill to work with it. Mission, it's been said, is finding out what God

is doing and joining in. And at present ... more and more patterns of worship and shared life are appearing on the edge of our mainstream life that cry, out for our support, understanding and nurture if they are not to get isolated and unaccountable."

If this movement can arise among a new generation of British Friends, its expression may hopefully be regenerative and hopefully encompass a rainbow of theologies through a 'prism' of an essentially universal and inclusive spectrum of the 'Light'.

Conclusion

The Light and the Prism

The 'hot' religions around the world are exploding, with a dangerous implication for a clash of militant evangelism with militant Islam. Therefore it is to the cool ones that we look to in hope of moderation that Peter Berger, a sociologist of religion and Lutheran, describes as emerging from a sense of 'doubt'. Doubt in this case being both a moderating influence and also essential to an integrity of spiritual growth ('In Praise of Doubt' 2009). It is also in accord with Berger's concept of 'epistemological modesty', holding beliefs and convictions lightly and with humility; knowing that 'knowing for sure' is more in the assertion than in the fact.

Who and what type of Friend twenty years hence will in part be dependent on whether such arguments, John Punshon and others propose, prove to be correct, or only partially so or not at all. The future constituency may consider the idea of a religious 'clarity and precision' to be sufficient, if not as correlates of plausible 'truth', then at least as corporately desirable. Or perhaps the succeeding generation will choose the harder path, a variant of the liberal way, that would be for some, inconveniently complex when compared with more simple orthodox doctrine.

Such a harder path would likely also be an expensive of personal effort to succeed. Prone to the effects of a dangerously diffuse process but also embracing diversity. Diversity and plurality I see as a hallmark of this age of its particular 'immediacy to God'. Such immediacy may set toward a more subtle determination than reduction to 'right' or 'wrong' or that of orthodox and heretic'. Hope then for an attempt at promoting the middle ground, a moderate theology that is a hand-shake between the liberal and evangelical that the 'emergent church' seems to promise.

History records that the 17th century founders had spiritual vigour in abundance. They 'quaked' of course, also howled and wailed. They walked naked as a religious sign; heroically endured awful suffering for their beliefs and yet were steadfast, buoyed up by an inner conviction that is barely possible to imagine, let alone emulate, today. Yet they were virtually dismissed by the succeeding generation as 'excessive enthusiasts'.

It can be said that the new injection of life blood for the 18th century Quietist constituency was in the form of those who carried the infectious meme of evangelism. That our present times represent a possibility for history to repeat itself among British Friends, is an intriguing one, but more in the analogy of difference from the 18th century than of similarity. The saying that history repeats itself twice, the first as tragedy, the second as farce; makes interesting the proposition of an evangelised BYM.

But it may not be so. If I am to keep any consistency with the notion of a surprising future then all theologies are possible, some even probable. The trick is to discern which is the most promising candidate. From the three strands of conservative, evangelist and liberal, may come a revised, expanded 'Neo' of these varieties or as mentioned above perhaps some synthesis from the emergent church movement.

If the signs are more of retrenchment than for growth, that is not to say that growth is not possible after the present process finds an equilibrium. We may have to be reduced to the root, from which new branches can grow as we seem to live in a time as widows and

widowers of a previous spirit of the age. So we can only grieve our loss and hold onto the hope that a future generation will learn and develop from what parts of the wide Quaker tradition they can most usefully apply.

I end on a hope for a British Religious Society of Friends to persist, in part or whole, in a particular form that is already present, and is worthy of the future. It is a hope best expressed in an often quoted piece from Quaker Faith and Practice-

"The religious Society of Friends might be thought of as a prism through which the Divine Light passes, to become visible in a spectrum of many colours, many more in their richness, than words alone can express"
(QFP 1995:18.20).

Bibliography

'Who We Are: Questions of Quaker Identity' Booklets A: 'Our Tradition Today'. Booklet B: 'Our Experience and Tomorrow'. Quaker Resources for Learning: Quaker Home Service and Woodbrooke (1995).

'The Future of British Quakers (Revised Second Edition) Alistair Heron (2004).

'Caring Conviction Commitment; Dilemmas of Quaker membership today' Alistair Heron. Quaker Home Service and Woodbrooke (1992).

'Epistles & Testimonies'- 2009 Britain Yearly Meeting Proceedings.

'The Word Made Flesh' John Punshon. Friends Quarterly (October 2003 Vol No.33, No.8).

'Portrait in Grey; A short history of the Quakers' John Punshon. Quaker books (2006).

'The Desecularization of the World; Resurgent Religion and World Politics' Ed. Peter L. Berger. Ethics and Public Policy Centre (1999).

'Quakerism Past and Present: An Enquiry into the Causes of its Decline (Quakers) in Great Britain and Ireland' (1859)

'A Rumour of angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural' Peter L. Berger. Pelican Books (1971).

'The Varieties of Religious Experience' William James (1902) Collins Fount Paperbacks (1977).

'In Praise of Doubt: How to Have Convictions Without Becoming a Fanatic' Peter L. Berger and Anton Zijderveld. Harper One (2009).

'The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction' Ben Pink Dandelion. Oxford University Press (2008).