

ONE-OH-ONE

The Future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain.

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1. Introduction

BYM is an abbreviation for 'The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain', which is British Quakerism's corporate body. So, with the exceptions mentioned later, we can equate 'BYM' with 'Quakerism'.

If the word "Quakerism" is to retain its present meaning, then what will guide BYM over the coming decades will be the Spirit. Quakers must maintain their commitment to heeding the promptings of love and truth in their hearts, and maintain their trust that these promptings are the leadings of God.

If BYM accepts guidance as to its future from a rational, secular decision making process, then it may continue to call the movement 'Quakerism', but that will only be because the meaning of the word 'Quakerism' will have been altered. If we agree that its meaning is to remain unchanged, then Quakerism in Britain will be best guided if Quakers improve their discernment, improve their willingness to trust the leadings of God, and improve their willingness to be led, transformed, and strengthened in their witness.

If I were to win this essay competition, and its recommendations were accepted, then it would be the Spirit, not this essay, which would guide BYM.

What I will try to show is how Quakerism can lessen that which blocks Quakers' ears to God's promptings, debilitates trust, and leads to action which however admirable, is not Spirit-led. I shall seek to identify those forces, show that they pose a credible threat, and suggest how they may be countered.

This essay is not about what individual members of BYM should or should not believe. Nor about my religious beliefs, if any. Nor is it about what is morally right or wrong. It is about the *organisation*, BYM.

Although situations are conceivable (Note 2) in which BYM does not remain Quakerism's corporate expression, I will not consider them.

2. Organisations, members, and their differing aims

It is not the case that BYM and its members are the same. An organisation has an identity separate from that of its members. Legally, it is a different person. Both BYM on the one hand, and its members on the other, are followers of Quakerism. But they are no more the same than are any two individual members.

It is frequently, probably normally, the case that the aims, purpose, or objects of an organisation are not entirely the same as those of its members. For instance, most companies exist to make profit for their shareholders. The employment they offer and the products they produce are simply means to an end. Few employees share these aims. Their object relates mainly to their pay and their careers. Job satisfaction and pride in the product may be supportive motivations, but not the primary ones. Some employees may even be opposed to the company's aims. Many communists work satisfactorily in capitalist companies. Much the same applies in a not for profit organisation - a government department, even a school. This can also apply in an organisation such as a church. The objects or doctrines declared by the leadership are often not shared by all the laity. Many Catholics use condoms.

It is acceptable and normal for some members of a religious society not themselves to be religious.

In general, an organisation's fundamental aims cannot be altered by its members. A communist shop steward can lead action that has the effect of reducing the shareholders' profit, but cannot turn the organisation into a workers' co-operative. The teachers in a local government school must follow the set curriculum, even though they consider it flawed or even counter-productive. Their only alternative is to find a job elsewhere.

Organisations themselves are often members of wider organisations. A school whose performance deteriorates, possibly due to the conflicting aims of its staff, is reminded of its organisational purpose by the local authority, or by Ofsted. Even if the whole school, the governors and the head teacher wished to abandon education, and convert the school to some other purpose, such as a sports centre, they would be prevented. The shareholders of a failing company bring in new management, or close a factory and move production to somewhere where labour costs are lower. Intelligent leadership will allow a wide degree of variation from unremitting pursuit of an organisation's aims. But for most, the fundamental aims cannot be altered.

However, organisations such as those which are legally controlled by their members have the option to alter their aims. We may regret that the members of mutual societies, such as Building Societies and Friends Provident, can in effect be bribed by wealthy members (usually themselves profit-seeking companies) to amend their constitutions so that they become profit-seeking. Members of a football club, a trade union or a religious society have the freedom to amend their constitutions. The members of BYM could conceivably decide that they would worship Gaia rather than God.

But BYM is not only a religious society, it is a charity, and as such is constrained by laws administered by the Charity Commission, a government agency. A charity is not permitted to become a non-charity. To do so the members would have to abandon the charity and set up another organisation. They would not be permitted to take the former charity's property with them. The law is that if a charity is dissolved, all its property must go to a charity with the same aims.

BYM has a further constraint. It has its charitable status because it is a religious organisation. Its aims or Object, agreed with the Charity Commission, state that this is the case. The agreement also includes a provision forbidding amendment of this object.

(However, the Commission's present definition of 'religious' is very wide*. (See Note Org 1))

The members of BYM cannot amend BYM's stated religious and charitable aims.

3. BYM's Core Business

Over time an organisation tends to expand its activities. A firm making jam might obtain equipment to print the labels for their jam jars. It might then arrange to use their spare printing capacity to produce other firms' labels. A milkman might branch out into selling bread and other groceries. Often these ancillary activities are profitable in the short run but later changes beyond the firm's control make them less so. Perhaps there is new legislation about the handling of groceries. The milkman invests to meet that requirement but does not notice the impact on profitability. The time spent on the groceries makes the milkman late every day. Once such a firm realises its decision-making is confused, and its staff ignorant of some aspects of its operations, it might call for advice. Possibly it will be advised to abandon its original purpose and concentrate on one of its new ventures. More likely the advice will be to concentrate on its core business. A consultant might suggest the milkman abandons the groceries.

The declared and agreed objects of BYM are 'religious' and 'charitable'. Rather than be restricted to formal definitions of the term 'religious', the agreement BYM reached with the Charity Commission illustrates BYM's aims by reference to "Quaker Faith and Practice", which the Commission preferred to refer to by its sub-title - BYM's "Book of Christian Discipline".

QF&P records an extensive range of activities in which Quakers have been involved in the past. It also makes clear that those activities were carried out as a result of religious conviction. The source of that conviction, and the channel by which the source connects with the individual, are at the very heart of Quakerism. (See footnote Org 2)

The core business of BYM, therefore, is to facilitate and to some extent to implement Quakerism as described in QF&P. And Quakerism is essentially concerned with perceiving and acting upon religious

direction.

Rather like the milkman being involved with the distribution of groceries to the detriment of his core business of delivering milk, BYM is in danger of becoming over-concerned with its own governance and in external activities in pursuit of peace and justice, to the detriment of its religious basis. Just as groceries are a Good Thing, so are Peace and Justice. But we must not let this obscure our core business, our essential purpose. A General must not take so much interest in the tactics that he neglects the strategy.

4. What Quakers do and how they do it.

What Quakerism leads one to do is specified in Section 1.01 of "Quaker Faith and Practice" (QF&P):

As Friends we commit ourselves to a form of worship which allows God to teach and transform us...all our testimonies grow from this ...

And how Quakerism tells one to start doing it is stated in Advice 1:

Trust [the promptings of love and truth in your hearts] as the leadings of God...

The direction Quakerism should go is to aim to:

- perceive those promptings more clearly,
- learn more readily, and
- be more ready to be transformed into activity in the direction discerned.

BYM should not use a process of rational analysis and negotiation to decide the direction it wishes to proceed. That is the normal way that strategic decisions are made in our secular society. But it is not Quakerism.

It is important to accept that to trust is something one can deliberately choose to do, possibly despite considerable doubts. In a grammatically imperative statement Quakers are not urged to obey, nor even to believe or accept the leadings of God, but simply to trust them.

5. Essentials and non-essentials.

Many modern Quakers have found Quakerism attractive and satisfying because it dispenses with most outward forms of religion. Authoritarianism, paternalism, ritual, emphasis on sin, sentimentality, emotion, theatricality ... so many features found in other faiths and Christian denominations are thankfully absent. A Quaker can practice meditative spirituality and engage in ethical consideration free from overt religiosity.

However, what many Friends do not know (because, shamefully, they have not been informed, or one might say, 'been kept uninformed') is that Quakerism embraces all the essential elements of Christianity. It can be argued that Quakerism is more Christian than other Christian denominations. But the features of the religion which have been definitely rejected by BYM are hidden behind those that are more obvious.

Non-essentials

Quakerism does away with the emphasis on sin, which so preoccupies many other Christians. Possibly the enthusiasm and bravery of early Friends was an ecstatic reaction to the doctrines of religion in the 17th Century. The threat of Hell was suddenly lifted. Gospel study revealed that Jesus showed God to be essentially benevolent. Doctrines of love and forgiveness replaced those of sin and predestination.

Quakerism comes close to rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity. The emphasis is on the immediacy of the third person, the Holy Spirit. The other two, God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son are not ignored, but continual reference to the mystery of the three in one is absent. Ben Pink Dandelion says, "British Friends ...

do not explicitly deny the doctrine of the Trinity but do not necessarily subscribe to it." (References: 1).

Quakerism (in common with most other Protestant denominations) rejects the idea that women are inferior - though secular social pressures persist within the Society.

Quakers do not practice physical baptism with water.

Quakers do not have a paid ministry. (George Fox refers dismissively to 'hireling priests'.)

Quakerism has little interest in heaven and the afterlife. Until recent decades there was little emphasis on theology. Language that uses simplistic symbolism, such as 'He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God' is absent.

Importantly, Quakerism does not wait for the second coming. It has a 'realised eschatology' - "Christ has come to teach his people himself".

Some Essentials

Many Quakers are convinced that BYM is entirely different from other Christian churches. They might even object to the use of 'other' in that sentence. But ignorance does not negate reality.

Far from being a rejection of Christianity, most of the essential features of Quakerism are due to a determination to follow closely the teachings of Jesus.

One reason why Quakers refuse to swear on oath in courts of law is that Jesus said, "Swear not at all".

The reason Quakers do not perform Eucharist, a ritual that symbolises taking in Jesus' body and blood, is that as Quakers they are continuously Christ-filled, and that blessed bread and wine are no more sacred than all food.

The reason Quakers reject hireling priests is that "Christ has come to teach His people Himself".

The reason Quakers do not practice baptism by water is that they are continuously baptised by the Holy Spirit. The reason they do not recite set prayers is that the words would be false if they were not utterly sincere at that time. So Quakers do not even recite the Lords Prayer during their periods of worship. This is surprising, or shocking, to many Christians. The reason Quakers have no creed is that the letter killeth. It is the Spirit which brings life.

But the effect of the absence of typical religious language and ritual is that newcomers equate the lack of them with the similar absence of them in secular life. They conclude (if indeed they bring the matter to mind) that Quakers are fundamentally different from other Christians.

The fact is that Quakerism is a religion, even though it rejects these features regarded as religious norms. It is part of the Christian faith, even though it eschews typically Christian characteristics.

In Britain we are used to words and titles which are relics from the past, having little bearing on current reality. Think of 'The Order of the Garter', or 'The Honourable Member...'. In Bristol we go "From College Green up White Ladies Road to Blackboys Hill". No-one remarks on the absence of a college, or the implications of the street-names. We are used to quaint but essentially meaningless terminology. So the true meaning of words such as God, worship, faith, - in fact all religious terminology - are easily lost. One of the most common phrases used today is 'Oh my God!' - in text language, "OMG". But the users are not thinking of God.

For some Friends, use of religious terminology is avoided or opposed because of past misunderstandings and hurts.

These factors which have tended to hide the essentials of Quakerism need to be countered if the true basis of Quakerism is not to be forgotten.

Is belief in God an essential?

BYM is inclusive. A member is not required to believe in God. Indeed, we cannot be certain that God exists, or that God can guide us. The source of what was formerly thought to be God may be something else: telepathy, a delusion, or even mind control by aliens. Maybe we are only characters in someone's dream. The possibilities are endless. But members of the denomination called Quakerism are a people that has decided it will trust a certain model, the model which is described in ample detail in "Quaker Faith and Practice". The model does not have to be accepted as truth, but simply trusted as a working hypothesis that has been satisfying and effective for good. It is the product, the output, the purpose of the organisation called BYM. It is the possibly erroneous but nonetheless real ideology of Quakerism. Because it works, Quakers adhere to it and others admire it. Quakers and many others have found it to be not only personally satisfying but valuable to the advancement of civilisation. It's a Good Thing even if it were a delusion. But it will lose its effectiveness if its members become convinced it is a delusion. If members no longer feel able to put their trust in the possibility that there is a God and that it can guide and support them if they allow it, then Quakerism as we know it, and its effectiveness for good, will disappear.

In "Quakers and the Ecumenical Agenda" (ref 5) two of the four 'Quaker gifts' to the ecumenical movement mention God and another mentions religion (page 8). It also lists 9 ways that Quakers distinguish the Holy Spirit from the human spirit (page 10). This pamphlet represents BYM's position.

While it is acceptable for some Quakers to reject God, Quakerism itself will die if it does so. BYM is an organisation set up and expected to as it were produce a product. If it produces something else, or does not produce what people have a right to expect of it, it fails.

6. Is BYM Christian?

From the objective viewpoint of comparative religion, there can be no doubt that Quakerism is within the Christian camp. Only if 'a religion' was defined so broadly as to call each of scores of factions and sects 'a religion' might Quakerism be one outside Christianity.

Most fellow Christians, if they know of Quakers, would also say Quakers were Christian. But if told more about Quakers, that they apparently have no priests, no creed, no baptism, no Eucharist, do not repeat the Lord's Prayer, don't believe the Bible, don't even sing hymns, then most lay-people might conclude that perhaps Quakerism was not Christian after all.

But why did the Christian church leaders implore BYM to join them when, in the 1990s, they reformed the Christian ecumenical bodies - the 'Churches Together' organisations? It was not because Quakerism is un-Christian, on the contrary: could it be that they regarded Quakerism as more Christian than other denominations? That is what George Fox intended, that Quakerism should be closer to the teachings of Jesus and his disciples than were the other denominations.

Quaker ideals are those of Jesus more so than of any other religious or ethical leader, philosopher or prophet.

There are subtle indications of Quakerism's Christian basis even in Advice 1, where it refers to 'God whose Light...' - a reference to Jesus. And 'shows us our darkness' - a nod towards Christianity's concern about sin, and 'leads us to a new life' - a reflection of Christianity's concern about being born again. None of these doctrines appear in other faiths. The whole of Quakerism is in tune with Jesus' prediction, "you will worship me in Spirit and in Truth" rather than in scriptures and structures and buildings.

Quakerism is highly regarded by most other Christian churches, and, in so far as it is recognised at all, by

other world faiths. BYM has demonstrated (References, 2) to the satisfaction of the other Christian churches that Quakerism embodies all the key, essential features of Christianity - baptism, Eucharist and ministry. It is only on the surface that it differs.

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After BYM's decision to confirm its membership of the 'Churches Together' movement in 1989, many fine Quakers who were uncomfortable with the decision felt bound to resign their membership of the Society. (One, well known to me, was held in high esteem, so that with permission from Meeting for Sufferings, she was permitted to remain an Elder.)

Too many Friends are ignorant of these facts. They believe, reasonably but mistakenly, that Quakerism is little more than what they witness in Meetings for Worship.

Other Friends know but deny their Christianity. They see the hypocrisy, the excesses of Evangelicals, the child-abuse by clerics, the support for war, the divisions amongst the Anglicans, and conclude, "If that's Christianity I want none of it!" But this is illogical. There are many bad British people, but that's no ground for denying one is British.

It might be challenging to some British Quakers, but the indisputable fact is that BYM is an active, leading member of the Christian church just as most British Quakers are members of the British nation.

7. Quaker Testimonies

A common assumption is that Quaker testimonies are statements of moral or ethical aspiration, a form of creed. The idea that a testimony is a statement probably arises because of the prominence given to the statement of the testimony to peace that was made by the society to Charles II in 1660. Rather than a document or an aim, a testimony is a behaviour, a way of living. They are what a Quaker typically does, or clearly refrains from doing. Much as Quakers may aspire to making less impact on the environment, and much as they publicise their concern about climate change, they will not be able to say they have a testimony to the environment until most of them have far smaller carbon footprints than non-Quakers.

However, a Quaker testimony is more than that. It is behaviour which is intended to bear witness to some religious principle. Refusal to tip one's hat, or to call the squire 'Sir', were not simply acts of defiance but a witness to a belief that all are equal in the eyes of God. To refer to the days of the week as "Firstday, Second-day..." is to draw attention to a one's living in God's kingdom, not a pagan one.

A testimony is evidence that demonstrates God's effect. Thus the other Quaker usage of the word 'testimony' occurs when the life of a deceased Friend is recounted, not to heap praise on that Friend but as evidence of God's grace. As is made clear in QF&P 1.01, all the testimonies of Quakerism grow from Quakers' right following of the leadings of the Spirit.

8. Religious Language

Anyone joining a specialist organisation, be it a sports club, a professional body, or a religious group, should be willing to learn and accept its jargon. Moreover, just because many people misunderstand certain words, we need not abandon them. The word 'Christian' does not necessarily mean a rabid evangelical fundamentalist. 'God' does not necessarily mean an authoritarian old man with a long white beard. We are limited if we choose not to use perfectly good words simply because some people with whom we disagree use, mis-use, abuse or over-use them.

The G word.

Dictionaries exist for use when there is uncertainty as to a word's meaning. People differ about the nature or even the existence of God or their gods, but all know what the word 'God' means. In case not, the dictionary tells us: a god is a supernatural being worshipped as the controller of some aspect of life. And 'God' with a capital 'G' means "the sole supreme being ... in religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam."

If what we thought was one thing turns out to be another, we use a different word. For instance if we heard the noise of something approaching and thought it was a thunderstorm, and started acting accordingly, but

then discovered it was the artillery of an approaching battle, we would not go on calling it thunder. Similarly, if some Friends come to believe that what was thought to be the effects of God, was actually a delusion, it is confusing and untruthful if they continued to call it God. Even if one detests thunder, one does not object to the weather forecasters using the word 'thunder'.

A few years ago, in the east end of London, the BNP's use of the Union flag caused local authorities to stop flying it on public buildings for fear of being labelled pro-BNP. There was then a determined effort to 'win back' the flag, by insisting it be flown on all suitable occasions. BYM needs to ensure it does not get into such a position. As a religious society, it should not be denied use of religious terminology which, unlike complex circumlocution, is in accordance with Quakerism's insistence on truth and on simplicity.

Does anyone object to the word 'dog', either because some people have had bad experiences with dogs, or because there is such a wide variation of breeds of dog? Despite the huge variations in size, appearance, temperament, purpose, etc. we all know what 'dog' means, and it would be foolish to abandon the word, just because some of us have been bitten.

No-where in QF&P is the word 'God' given a unique Quaker definition. But from the two most important passages in QF&P (1.01 and Advice 1) we see that the characteristics of God which are relevant to Quakerism are that God can 'teach and transform us', and that God has a 'Light' which 'shows us our darkness and brings us to new life.'

As for the meaning of some other words, it is important to note that the verbs 'to believe' and 'to trust' are used when there is room for doubt. Otherwise we use 'to know'.

The word 'religion' is about God. The dictionary says it is "belief in or worship of a supernatural power ... considered to be divine and have control of human destiny". And in the word 'religious' the '-ous' means having religion, not merely being interested in it, or associated with it. 'Famous' does not mean merely being associated with fame. Can one truly 'worship' an abstract noun?

Friends are increasingly concerned that discussion of important issues is inhibited by the excessive political correctness of avoidance of simple, honest religious terminology. One may sympathise with those who have been hurt by in the past, but these victims do not have a right to demand we change our language.

9. Possibilities.

In this section I wish to consider briefly some of the directions in which British Quakerism could develop.

1. A first possibility is that BYM might become excessively introspective, like a closed monastery concentrating on prayer and survival and withdrawing from the world. This is unlikely since the essence of true Quakerism is openness and response to God's guidance, which has been found brings Quakers into the world.
2. A second is that British Quakerism might abandon its current form of worship, either by accepting programming or by adopting one or more radically different forms of worship. Alec Davison, an influential and inspiring Quaker, promotes 'experimental worship'. Experimental worship would not constitute a danger if it was regarded as an optional extra for use on specific occasions, so long as our current form of worship remained the norm.
3. A third and more insidious possibility is that BYM might become a Spiritual Society rather than a Religious Society. Almost all publications and many courses and conferences offered by Woodbrooke and by Quaker Life centre on 'spirituality' and very few mention 'religion' or use normal religious terminology. Quakerism values spirituality but religion consists of more than this. (See note 3)
4. A fourth and more likely possibility is that Quakerism concentrates on its reformist zeal, its Peace and Social Witness, and forgets the original source of that zeal. It is my view and that of many others better informed than I, that this is a very real danger. I believe this is happening now. It could be even worse if BYM

were to become over-enthusiastic over one issue, such as environmentalism.

5. Another possibility is that BYM might lose faith in the reality of God's guidance. This threat is already evident in the increase in non-theistic Quakerism, and particularly in the increasing assertiveness of the non-theists.

Other possibilities are mentioned in Note 2.

Of all these possibilities I believe the most likely is a combination of 3 and 4 above, while the most threatening is number 5: non-theism.

10 (a). Secular Quakerism.

Possibilities 3 and 4 represent a Society resting on BYM's past experience and reputation, working in the fields of Peace and Social Witness and retaining the practice of silence; a silence which becomes simply meditation. As one who practised Transcendental Meditation before coming to Quakerism I can vouch for the power of meditation, as used by both Hinduism and Buddhism. Even the Green Party commences its business meetings with a form of meditation which they call 'attunement'.

This model, a reformist society with a tradition of meditation, could remain effective. But it would have lost the essence of Quakerism that has led to Quakers' extraordinary effectiveness. (Note 4)

Whether it really is God that inspires Friends to speak truth to power with such courage and tenacity, or whether it is only their belief that this is so, the conviction that one is acting as guided by and on behalf of God must be the source of this effectiveness. There is no other explanation of these two characteristics - the form of worship which allows God to influence a Quaker, and Quakerism's effect out of all proportion the number of its adherents. It cannot be a mere co-incidence.

10 (b). The Threat of Non-theism.

Non-theism within British Quakerism is the result of two influences: ignorance and intellectualism.

Too much ignorance?

Many members and attenders are ignorant of the essence of Quakerism. As an organisation, BYM seems to be unaware of the great turnover in its membership; the high percentage of Friends coming and going, joining for months or a few years, and leaving in their search for a spiritual home, or dying. Quakers avoid pedagogy. Among the words they dislike are 'induction training', and even 'teaching'. Unlike promoters of most other spiritual and personal development systems, Quakerism expects its initiates to discover for themselves the answers to such questions as:

'What do you do when worshipping',

'Is it the same as meditating?',

'Is there a God?',

'Is it only a co-incidence that Quakers have a unique form of worship, and they are so famous for their good works?',

The expectation was that newcomers, open to God's guidance, would discover the answers, just as Penn found he did not need to wear a sword. But only if they 'allow' it.

Quakerism was founded and has existed until recently in a world where most people were religious and schools taught Christianity. Newcomers to Quakerism were already educationally ready. Nowadays many enquirers have almost no religious experience. If they attend meeting for worship a few times, for whatever reason, they learn about Quakerism by observation. They may observe a Bible and a vase of flowers in a place of honour in the centre of the room, but hear no reference to either. Decoration? Ancient custom? They may anticipate hearing God-language and stories about Jesus, but hear none. They observe the quiet sitting, and hear the social concerns, the expressions of guilt, the condemnation of politicians and consumerism

and environmental degradation. They also sometimes hear emotional accounts of individuals' personal problems. They observe no overtly religious language or activity. They may be offered books and pamphlets, but they are given no guidance as to which are relevant today. It is not surprising that newcomers conclude that, 'It's great, you don't have to believe in God', or even 'You don't have to believe in anything'.

In the past there was a discipline of reading Advices and Queries monthly - the only element of programming. This provided an element of induction into Quakerism. But many Meetings have discontinued the practice.

Other newcomers - 'refugees from Christianity' - come from churches which they have left because of unwelcome practices and attitudes, such as emphasis on sin, threats of not being saved, belief in miraculous practices and a heavenly afterlife, and so on. They too will quickly feel confident they understand Quakerism, based on what they hear and otherwise observe, the main feature of which is an almost complete absence of what they regard as the essentials of religion - language, rituals, prayers and hymns. The evidence seems clear - this is not a religious organisation.

Although some of these newcomers might believe in God, or be open-minded, others will have decided there is no God, or that the word 'God' merely symbolises a human construct, 'all things bright and beautiful'. They find that what they hear and observe does not contradict these preconceptions.

The recently revised sections of QF&P do not require an applicant for membership to display knowledge of Quakerism's history or religious position. The requirement that they should be 'humble learners in the school of Christ' is only an illustrative quotation. But it does say that an applicant should accept the understanding of divine guidance, and the equality of all before God. There are several mentions of the applicant's acceptance of Quaker discipline, and familiarity with 'our book of discipline'. Whether visitors ensure all this is the case is uncertain, but in my experience visitors' reports seldom refer to religious matters.

Thus it is very possible that, simply through ignorance, the God-centred essence of Quakerism will degrade into little more than an interesting but outlived feature of historic Quakerism, along with quaint clothes and disownment.

Too much learning?

The second influence leading to the growth of non-theism is the number of seasoned, usually highly intelligent and learned Friends who have come to the conclusion that what was thought to be God is in fact a social construct, a delusion as David Boulton has so nicely put it. (He goes on to say that anyone believing in God might as well believe in Harry Potter.) Putting aside Quakerism's traditional suspicion of 'professors', one is bound to ask whether this philosophy conforms with Quaker testimonies to truth and to simplicity. It clearly does not fit with Quaker tradition, and it is difficult to see how it can fit with Quakerism as described in its book of Christian discipline. Non-theistic theories about the meaning of God are not simple. Is it 'true' to belong to a religious society if one is not religious?

A few years ago I had the opportunity (on an isolated island in the south Pacific, but that's another story) to spend two weeks reading, writing, thinking and trying to pray about my belief or otherwise in the existence of any model or feature of 'God' that was relevant to me. When I concluded that I was an atheist I sadly decided that on my return to Britain I'd have to resign from Quakers. I was glad when a few months later, in an ashram in India, my faith in a personal God was restored. (Reference 3.)

Quakerism is inclusive. There is no requirement to state any set belief. Non-theism is as acceptable as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Wiccanism. But Quakerism does expect its adherents to be open minded, to 'allow God to teach...'. I believe it fair to object when non-theists campaign to get BYM to accept their philosophy as its own. One joins a faith group for support in one's faith, not to have it deliberately undermined. One would not undermine a friend's capacity to love or to hope; should one seek to destroy another's faith? I might join a tennis club, even if I did not wish to play tennis. But I would not be expected to campaign for badminton to replace tennis, or to condemn all sport as delusional.

It will be extremely divisive when we revise QF&P in a few years from now, if Friends demand that words

offensive to them, such as 'God', be deleted.

The word 'spiritual' is ambiguous. It can refer to the many situations, scenes, and events which are generally uplifting, such as concerts, or it can refer to the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. In a religious context one omits the 'Holy'. But non-theists who reject belief in the Holy Spirit use the term 'spiritual' with the first of these two meanings. The ambiguity is non-confrontational. But it hides a deep division between those Quakers who have faith in the (Holy) Spirit and its power to guide and support them, and those for whom the word 'spirit' is at best an abstract noun signifying all that is good and satisfying. Some non-theists have openly described how they are continually 'translating' the religious terminology they encounter into their own preconceived concepts and beliefs.

It is not helpful during a meeting for worship when the source of vocal ministry is rational cognitive processing rather than the Holy Spirit. Nor in meetings for worship for business when it is unclear whether Friends are arguing from their rational predispositions or whether they are seeking to discern God's will.

Quakerism's inclusivity accepts all into its midst, but hopes that doubting newcomers will open themselves to the influence of the Spirit. It is when they steadfastly refuse to do so that a potential threat arises, and it is when they gain the confidence to ask for recognition of their dislike of Quakerly religious language, and their insistence it is not used, that the threat becomes a reality.

Ben Pink Dandelion (Reference 4) says that initiatives like Quaker Quest 'represent clarity over the strengths of Liberal Quakerism and a refusal to dumb down...'. And that they 'represent a solidly theist approach unafraid to say so...'. He goes on, 'Diffuse beliefs ... have been seen to make liberal religious associations particularly vulnerable, but these trends counter both those danger-points... and may help bring in those happy ... within a theist framework without being too theologically explicit.'

Chainsaws.

Advice 4: "The Religious Society of Friends is rooted in Christianity." In the 2009 Yearly Meeting Gathering there were several references to Quakerism as a tree. In particular Julia Ryberg illustrated the extent of Quakerism with a picture of a leafy tree, each leaf being a significant Quaker activity. It occurred in meeting for worship that what connects the roots to the leaves, is the trunk - symbolising our structures, BYM itself, and what brings the vitality to the leaves is the sap rising invisibly up the trunk, God's Spirit. Then it came to me that trees are most often brought down by sawing through the trunk. The chainsaws of non-theism are already at the edges of our precious little coppice. Who will hug the trees to save the coppice?

11. The Spiritual Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain.

BYM, the Religious Society of Friends (RSOF) seems to be morphing into the Spiritual Society of Friends (SSOF). Almost all publications and many courses and conferences centre on 'spirituality' and few mention 'religion' or use normal religious terminology. Woodbrooke presumably seeks to offer courses that will be well attended, veering in the direction of progressiveness, rather than orthodoxy, and this is to be welcomed. But one is unsure of Quaker Life's motivation. It seems that their aim is not primarily to 'nurture our faith' (to quote their terms of reference) but by playing down BYM's religious nature, and publicising the spiritual, to increase membership, or at least to reduce its decline.

In this section I want to consider the case for our RSOF becoming a SSOF, in fact even if not in name.

Spirituality is perhaps the major part of any religion. It is what most Quakers and enquirers are seeking. Even those for whom BYM's Peace or Social Witness activities are paramount value the spirituality of a meeting for worship, more than its religious nature.

Many Friends actively reject the word 'religion' with its connotations of authoritarianism, reminding them of other churches, and suggesting they must believe in a father-figure God. For BYM to rename itself 'spiritual' rather than 'religious' might be to conform better to the testimony to truth, and the revised title would communicate better with those who are seeking a spiritual home.

Only a tiny proportion of the Britain's population share BYM's peace and social witness aims and can also tolerate a religious affiliation. But we know from the growth in numbers who have turned to eastern spiritual traditions that there is a great hunger for spiritual exercises and philosophies. The followers of eastern meditation are willing to accept concepts and terminology at least as complex as those found in standard Christianity. They seek spirituality but reject Christianity because of its language, not because of its ethics. The revised Quakerism, SSOF, could be a successful competitor to the more exotic offerings. One can envisage the SSOF being distinguished from other progressive, reformist, peace seeking, social reform groups by its tradition of meditation. By increase of membership, and retaining the RSOF reformist tradition, it might become even more effective for good.

It might even be that God's Spirit wills this situation. It has no pride, so does not demand recognition.

Such thinking ignores two realities. First, the competition. There are plenty of non-Christian spiritual organisations already in the field. Many have much more sophisticated recruitment strategies than Quakers would be willing to adopt - in my experience the respect for truth (in its simple meaning of not stating falsehoods) is much less. Secondly, the eastern meditative techniques are seldom accompanied by social concern. Many are essentially selfish - each follower seeking his or her own nirvana. Often there is a fatalistic philosophy which has it that suffering exists and the only way to avoid it is by re-birth in a plane where one will suffer less. The Buddhist organisation, Sotro Gakai International has more followers in Britain than Quakerism. I would guess that most readers of this essay have never heard of it, despite its having some socially responsible projects in some corners of the world. The Hari Krishna movement in London is (or was some years ago) the third biggest distributor of food to homeless people. But when I enquired about their long list of charitable offshoots I found that they were all only for their own members. Much the same goes for many Christian denominations.

A Buddhist monk once angrily replied to a question I'd asked by asserting that an imperfect person could not bring about good. In his tradition, the first step was to perform 108,000 total (I cannot recollect the word: kneeling, touching one's forehead on the floor, then standing), followed by years of other exercises, and could not expect perfection in this life. In contrast, Jesus said, "Put down your nets and follow me." As Quakers, in 'the school of Christ', we do not accept that only the highly trained can 'do good'. All, even 'sinners', can work for 'thy Kingdom come'.

Two criteria for being a religious organisation are, firstly, being God-centred, and secondly, being a structured, to some extent disciplined, society. A third, which is essential but not self-sufficient, is being spiritual.

Britain is a better place for having in it a God-centred society stripped of the off-putting accretions found in other denominations. There is only one such - the religious SOF.

12. What should BYM do now?

Quakerism is extraordinarily effective. This is evidenced by the number mentions (all of which are positive) of it in the serious media. For instance on Radio 4 Quakers are mentioned more often than any other church except Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Jews and Moslems. Another indication is the lengths CCBI went to to persuade BYM to join the the ecumenical movement. A third occurs when one travels in Europe where many older people remember Quakers for their famine relief after WW2.

What I have tried to demonstrate is that BYM is in danger of losing that which is the source of its effectiveness, namely its practice of trusting and heeding the guidance of the unmediated Divinity.

BYM's rational decision, on behalf of Quakerism in Britain, must be to continue to nurture and support Quakerism's whole-hearted commitment to its form of worship, for the sole reason that it "allows God to teach ...us". Having discerned God's leadings, BYM should then assist Quakers to accept them and undertake the appropriate activity.

In the short term BYM needs to neutralise the forces which seek to undermine this process on the grounds that there is no such God. Quakerism is a faith community. As such it will survive only as long as it has faith.

This is not to say that non-theists should be purged from BYM. Quakerism is inclusive. All that BYM needs to do is to take steps to lessen the threat that non-theism might become an accepted Quaker philosophy. A simple way to do this would be to ensure that all Friends (including Enquirers) fully understand what Quakerism is and what Quakers do. As mentioned before, these two facts are clearly stated in QF&P 1.01 and in Advice 1. Enquirers, members and attenders need to be convinced that QF&P is up-to-date, relevant and True, and to have their attention drawn to these two extracts.

Quaker Life could use its structures and channels of communication to spread this message. At its simplest this could be by a letter to all Friends. For Enquirers it could be a new introductory leaflet.

Also in the short term, Quaker Life should desist from promoting non-theism. Members of QL Central Committee should re-read their terms of reference, abide by them, and not authorise initiatives which go beyond them.

BYM's trustees have a duty to ensure that BYM does not act outwith its agreed Purpose.

13. What should BYM do in the longer term?

GOVERNANCE

An excellent recent change in the governance of BYM has been the establishment of a management trustee body with responsibility for ensuring BYM's aims are implemented legally, efficiently and effectively, while the role of Meeting for Sufferings has been changed to that of augmenting Yearly Meeting's predominant role of setting those aims. MfS organised a wide consultation process which confirmed that Friends' top priority was "Strengthening the spiritual roots in our meetings and in ourselves". This came ahead of 'speaking out', 'peace', 'sustainability', 'community', 'crime and social justice', and 'efficiency'.

In the two meetings I attended as part of this consultation the decision was reached by a process of God-centred discernment, albeit in a very structured, one could say 'programmed' setting. The wording of each option was not open to amendment. The preferred statement did not include the word 'religious' nor 'God' but by including 'spiritual' it came much nearer to our religious basis than any other options. And by using 'spiritual roots' it could be taken to refer to our Christian roots, or at least to our commitment to a way of worship which allows God to teach us.

So the membership has directed BYM to adopt this as its priority. I am unsure that BYM's organisational leadership has done so. The process which I suggested in the previous section - simply informing all Friends of what Quakers are and what Quakers do - would be a simple first step.

In all but the smallest organisations the policy makers are very dependant on their staff for fact-finding and recommendations. When I was a member of Meeting for Sufferings (MfS) the normal process was that we received from the staff voluminous documentation specifying structures and projects. (Unlike my experience in Local Government, we were not offered three options, a recommended one, a less radical one, and a third, more radical.) In MfS almost invariably a few friends would draw attention to some minor inconsistency or incompatibility with another area's interests. But with lack of knowledge, and a degree of awe, our contribution was little more than rubber-stamping. I gather that much the same process occurs within the Central Committees. However, this is not a totally unsatisfactory process, as it is always possible to reject a proposal, and there is a high degree of confidence in the staff. But it does not adequately meet Quakerism's need to heed and trust God's leadings.

Broad policy should emanate primarily from Yearly Meeting and MfS, and not from the staff. Staff will inevitably have the opportunity to comment, for instance by saying a proposal was technically impossible, or more costly than MfS realised, but their input should come after MfS and YM have indicated the direction of their discernment.

Since MfS works on long-term goals, the lack of resource to implement a new policy should seldom be a reason for its rejection. Resources would need to be found; for instance, staff trained, retrained, or recruited. From various contacts with Friends House I believe the opposite occurs. The projects that are maintained

are those for which there are skills, and they continue until the staff member retires, not because YM or MfS has discerned that they should continue. Proposals are rejected on the grounds that the requisite skills are not available in Friends House, or because they do not fit in with a department's current plans, or that there is no budget.

A case (an exception which proves the rule) in which I was personally and I would say significantly involved was when in Yearly Meeting a view was expressed that 'something must be done' about the war in Kosovo. The then QPS staff immediately declared it was out of the question, mainly because there was no budget. But YM insisted and QPS was instructed to prepare a draft minute during the lunch break. They returned with a proposal which personally I felt was worded to imply acceptance but included a get-out on availability of funds. So then a Friend proposed we held a collection then and there and the response was prodigious. At the end of the session hundreds of pounds were collected in buckets. An appeal went out and within weeks QPS had established a programme which involved recruitment and training of suitable staff, and which continued for years. By all accounts has been very successful. But more often what happens is that staff declare a proposal impossible and it is immediately dropped.

MfS must set up a process to ascertain by prayerful Quaker Decision Making what BYM should be doing in the medium and long term, and what should be laid down. Staff involvement in this process should be restricted to the provision of data and clerical support. The data MfS would need would include resource costs and some measures of effectiveness of all current projects, and predicted financial resources. Whether MfS should set up a committee (of their own number) to do this or whether they should try to do it in plenary session is up to them. They might also follow the practice of the American Friends National Committee on Legislation, which consults all members annually.

The same principle should apply to decisions about increasing and decreasing the resources for each current project.

Meeting for Sufferings must accept that its primary task is to ensure that it, subject only to Yearly Meeting in session, sets BYM's goals, with no direction but God's.

MEMBERSHIP

BYM's policy is, or should be, set by the Minutes of Yearly Meeting, which in turn are the product of the Clerk's understanding of the sense of the Meeting. If that sense is set by Quakerly discernment then the Minutes should be true to God's will. If on the other hand there is a significant proportion of Friends in the Meeting who positively reject the concept of 'God's leadings', and demand full recognition of their conviction, then the Minutes are likely to be outwith that will. If non-theism were to become fully accepted there would be more Friends in YM demanding that the word 'God' and other examples of religious language be omitted from Minutes. It has not been unusual in Yearly Meeting for the clerk to write a minute which includes God-language or a Biblical quotation, whereupon a Friend has risen to object. Usually the offending phrase is excised. This is often on the grounds that religious language makes some Friends uncomfortable. But there are other Friends who find the refusal to use religious terminology in a supposedly religious society not only uncomfortable but outrageous. It is as if a person were to join a tennis club and not only object to tennis and all sports, but to demand that the word 'tennis' never be used.

There needs to be comprehensive, effective action to ensure that most Friends are God-centred and that non-theism - while not banned - is not accepted as a valid form of Quakerism.

When QF&P is next revised (which should be soon) guidance on the appointment of Elders should be such as to make Friends hesitate before appointing Friends who are assertively non-theistic. An army would be foolish to recruit pacifists - even more so to promote them as officers. A pacifist organisation would be foolish to appoint an active militarist to a significant position.

ASSOCIATIONS

BYM should ensure that its members are aware of its active role in the Christian ecumenical movement. When BYM after long and hard consideration confirmed its membership of the national (English, Welsh and Scottish) 'Churches Together' organisations its then YM Clerk was appointed as one of the three Presidents, alongside two Archbishops. Since then at least one other Quaker has been a President. Friends are also

active in many local Churches Together. At one time my (previous) local meeting provided the secretary and the treasurer of their our local Churches Together, and this is not uncommon.)
BYM at national and local levels is also much involved in the inter-faith movement.

FALSEHOOD

It is a denial of Quakers' testimony to truth for Friends to be reticent about Quakerism's essential religious and Christian nature. It is claimed that informing newcomers of Quakerism's religious nature would deter newcomers. (As I write, the current *The Friend* carries a letter complaining that a valued member was "obliged to resign because of the attitude of some self declared 'believers' ... Meetings cannot afford to lose people like this." This sort of demand, that Quakers keep quiet about their religious convictions even while within their religious society, is not infrequent, and would be laughable were it not so offensive. (The letter writer goes on to propose a solution that is more akin to a gladiatorial battle than the Quaker Decision Making process, suggesting that he is ignorant of Friends' ways.) One wonders whether the motivation of those who demand we do not use such language for the sake of newcomers is only that they themselves dislike it.

The growth of the evangelical churches, and of the eastern spiritual movements with their exotic religious language, suggests that the assumption that seekers cannot tolerate religious language is exaggerated. People are not deterred by religiosity, but by bad experiences with some other forms of Christianity. BYM needs to make clear that Quakerism has firmly rejected those unattractive, unnecessary features.

LAST WORDS

Much as it would be a pleasure to dwell at length on exciting, radical new directions BYM could take (for instance to be the leading religious organisation to face climate change) the simple fact is that if it is to remain true to its essential nature, Quakerism must go back to basics as specified in the first paragraph of QF&P 1.01.

As friends we commit ourselves to a way of worship which allows God to teach and transform us. We have found corporately that the Spirit, if rightly followed, will lead us into truth, unity and love: all our testimonies grow from this leading.
QF&P 1.01.

I know of no other way ... of trusting in the name of the Lord, and staying upon God, than sinking into silence and nothingness before Him...
So long as the enemy can keep us reasoning he can buffet us to and fro...
John Bellows, 1895, QF&P 2.15.

[The early Friends] made the discovery that silence is one of the best preparations for ... the reception of inspiration and guidance.
Rufus Jones, 1937, QF&P 2.16

14. References and Notes

Reference 1: Ben Pink Dandelion, "The Quakers - A very short introduction" pub Oxford, 2008, page 102.

Reference 2: "To Lima With Love, Baptism, Eucharist and ministry: a Quaker response", pub London YM, 1987. (out of print but said soon to be republished)

Reference 3: "Call of the Bell Bird, A Quaker Travels the World" by Jennifer Kavanagh, published 2004 by Quaker Books.

Reference 4: Ben P D as above, page 115. Also, in "Twelve Quakers and Worship" by Quaker Quest (2004) only three of the 12 accounts seem to me to be not theistic.

Reference 5: "Quakers and the ecumenical agenda" QCCIR, 2009.

Note 1. 'heed' is not merely to perceive but to take appropriate action. To heed a notice saying "Danger, thin ice" is not merely to see it, but to skate elsewhere.

Note 2: What is not discussed here.

a. For instance one or more of the factions or interest groups now within BYM might expand to the extent that while still followers of Quakerism they rivalled BYM in resources and influence, rather as when

Quakerism split into Hicksite and Gurneyite factions in America in the 19th Century.

b. Another aspect this essay will not cover is that other YMs such as those elsewhere in Europe might join BYM to form perhaps Europe Yearly Meeting.

c. A third is that Quakerism, in the sense of "Quakerly attitudes and behaviours" could spread significantly outside the membership of BYM, rather as socialism is a superset of the Labour Party, to the extent that the term "Quakerism" described a philosophy and lifestyle independent of any membership.

d. BYM could hive off QPSW so as to concentrate on its core business as a religion. QPSW might become EQPSW (European) or EFSC modelling on AFSC which is governed by several YMs. EFSC / EQPSW could have a governance similar to QUNO Geneva whose Board includes representatives from all European YMs.

d. merging with another church, such as the Methodists,

e. BYM fading while Quakerism becomes a house-church movement.

Note 3: I did a rough survey of the courses in a Woodbrooke brochure. I assessed 31% of them as being religious, 40% practical and 34% spiritual.

Note 4: That BYM (Quakers) is far more effective in achieving the goals it seeks is evidenced by the number mentions (all of which are positive) of it in the serious media. For instance on Radio 4 Quakers are mentioned more often than any other church except Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Jews and Moslem. Another indication is the lengths CCBI went to to persuade BYM to join the the ecumenical movement. A third occurs when one travels in Europe where many older people remember Quakers for their famine relief after WW2.

Footnote Org 1: But this new, excessively broad definition of religion is currently being questioned following a case where an employee claimed unfair dismissal on the grounds that his employers were not adjusting their practices sufficiently in the interest of climate change. The employee claimed his concern for the environment was within the definition of 'religious'.

Footnote Org 2: I conducted a rough survey of the content of QF&P. Opening pages randomly and reading the first paragraph I found that six out of ten times my eye fell on overtly religious language. (Three of those that were not specifically religious related to 'church government'. When we were revising QF&P I argued that it should not absorb "Church Government", for several reasons, one being that QF&P is much used by smaller YMs, another that church government needs to be amended far more often than the rest of QF&P.)