

## JOINING – FORM AND SUBSTANCE

### THE FUTURE OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS IN BRITAIN

#### A Submission for the Friends Quarterly 2009 Prize Essay

#### INTRODUCTION

The year 1859 saw a publication which had profound effects and made fundamental changes to the human view of the world. Charles Darwin's publication had a subtitle 'The preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life' which is a general theme as relevant to the perseverance of Quakers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as in the beginning or in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Halfway through *The Origin of Species* Darwin has a chapter addressing 'Difficulties on Theory'. Darwin was always as polite as he was perceptive. In describing how what we could call 'special creationists' might respond to his examples of surprising structural variations by introducing the role of the Creator, he wrote that this seemed to him "only restating the fact in dignified language". It is the aim of the present discussion both to be perceptive and to ensure that dignified language enlightens rather than obscures.

The year 1859 also saw the publication of two very different books about the decline of Quakerism. Thomas Hancock, a socialist priest and prophet of the Church of England, was awarded second prize for his essay entitled *The Peculium* (relating to the Quakers being called from the earliest days - in Biblical phraseology - the "peculiar people of God"). Hancock started as he meant to continue. The first sentence in the first chapter states, "It is the lot of societies made up of men and women to be subject to a law of decay." And decay is what he predicted as both proper and inevitable for the Society of Friends. He presented his case cogently and at length - what remained good in Quakerism should return to the Church from which it had come. Two of the details of his argument are worth special note in the present context. What had originally been viewed as "The Light" had become gradually to be spoken of as "a light" and considered as an influence, a religious tendency in every man, a part of his ordinary spiritual anatomy. Furthermore, for Hancock the greatest decay was manifest in the sphere of "aggression". "Originally, the Quakers were the sect most before the world ... Their present peculiarity is that they are the most hidden and private of all bodies." This personal and corporate introversion will be the subject of much more attention in the present discussion.

The other book about the decline of Quakerism published in 1859, and awarded the first prize, was *Quakerism, Past and Present* by John Stephenson Rowntree. The title of the present contribution follows from Rowntree's observation about the earliest Quakers. "It was the feeling that they were grasping a reality instead of a shadow – the substance instead of the form - that induced so many persons to accept the views proclaimed by Fox and his colleagues."

Rowntree has strong words to say about membership and about what we would call outreach. One of the many paradoxes that Rowntree describes is that Quakers were initially inclusive but soon became what he called seclusive. "Fox's views were far more extensive than the mere founding of a sect. Wishing to include all within its pale, it would have been contrary to the genius of primitive Quakerism to have made a definite statement as to who were members and who were not: the habitual attendance at their religious meetings was the only popular test which indicated whom were to be regarded as friends." Later he says, "It is justly remarked .. that the organisation of [Methodism] is "expansive", that of Quakerism

“seclusive”. We regard this as having been a powerful cause of the society’s first stationary, then retrograde condition - one that has been in operation almost from its origin to the present time.” Perhaps Rowntree’s sternest strictures were about disowning members. Changes were rapidly made and this issue, though vital at the time, need not detain us now.

Rowntree was not constrained by modern verbal sensitivities; he described the regrettable lack of propagandism and aggression, and of proselytes and proselytising. “History proves that such a system [of centralised authority] is best fitted for the prosecution of an active propagandism: the Quaker polity is the reverse of this, hence the main reason of its failure as an instrumentality for obtaining proselytes.” Later he adds, “The Society of friends was no longer an advancing aggressive body aspiring to universal dominion - it was one sect among many,” and still later he is very harsh in describing “the subjective character of modern Quakerism ... expressing itself in many pointless platitudes: ‘We are not a proselytising people’”.

Rowntree was forthright in his comments about Quaker traditions - meetings, silence, ministry and teaching. He believed that “the peculiar form of public worship adopted by the Friends has not a little to do with their declining numbers”. The desire to abstain from all ‘forms’ in meant that meetings for worship were frequently silent for months together which resulted in making the worship of God “specially distasteful to the young”. He noted that “the structure of the human mind is not adapted to long-continued silence and this is especially the case in the earlier stages of life”. Meetings often depended on a minister to be present. But Rowntree notes, possibly with a hint of a smile on his face, that “an eminent minister ... spoke strongly against persons expecting a revelation ‘as distinct as would be required to predict the downfall of a city, before they would venture to open their mouths in vocal prayer or ministry’”. Concerning the neglect of education in the early period of the society’s history Rowntree said it was “remarkable that the distorted application of the doctrine of the inward light” had been a major contributory factor. He further noted that by the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century “instead of being a company of faithful men and women, united in religious fellowship and possessing a strong bond of union in heartfelt allegiance to their common Lord, the Society of Friends increasingly assumed the character of a corporation, existing for ends partly religious, partly social and partly civil.” Later still he was caustic about how “as now developed and organised the Society is unsuited to be a direct agency ... even in the promulgation of its own most prominent tenets; and this has led persons to support associations for the advocacy of their principles in fragments e.g. the Peace Society, the Society for the Liberation of Religion from State Patronage and Control etc.” Many of these issues seem familiar to 21st century Quakers.

The response to some aspects of Rowntree’s essay was prompt. In 1860, the peculiarities of dress and speech were made optional, and a year later a complete revision of the Discipline was made. The pace of change after the 1861 Yearly Meeting was slow, as (according to Heron) the membership of the Society adapted itself to their internal changes, while becoming slowly aware of external changes that might mean fresh problems to face. By the turn of the century many people were touched and changed through both education and missions meetings. However few applied for membership. And the Society was divided - many missionaries were young converts to Quakerism of working-class origins. According to Isichei (quoted by Heron) John Stephenson Rowntree believed that a good deal of the criticism was due to their having offended the tastes of some in the Society.

So problems persisted, and again a comment rings true today. Heron records how at the Yearly Meeting of 1893 the 25 year-old John Wilhelm Rowntree (the same age as his uncle John Stephenson Rowntree had been when writing his prize essay) frankly told Friends that much that was said in the way of ministry in meetings for worship did not reach the youth of his generation. It simply passed them by and did not strike home. He called for religious messages expressed “in their own language”.

Further changes at and relatively soon after the Manchester Conference of 1895 need no further consideration in the present discussion.

## **THE PRESENT DISCUSSION**

In discussing the future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain the present discussion will focus on a fundamental change needed by the Society, namely that we need to go out - even to the highways and byways - and invite (not compel) people to come and JOIN US. It has already been pointed out that Rowntree was a proponent of outreach. The argument will be put forward here that this is a necessary approach not primarily because of numbers - although greater and sustained numbers are indeed fundamental to our survival - but because the message of the Quaker way is of major importance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for the church, for other faith groups, and for society in general, both the leaders and the people.

Of course "outreach" has explicitly been on our agenda for some years. But the public survey about British Quakers which is yet to be fully reported shows the amount of communication which is still needed. So it is very clear that for such an open and public and projected invitation - to join us - to be coherent, much hard thinking, hard work, and possibly fundamental change will also be needed in order to join explicit Quaker substance to our Quaker forms. That is the task of the next few pages.

Section 1 addresses the question: Is there really a problem now, with so many recent changes and developments?

Section 2 considers how an onlooker might view 21<sup>st</sup> century British Quakerism?

Section 3 asks whether 'only one thing is missing' - and, as outlined above, suggests that there are in fact two things lacking - one is U (as in the current Quaker outreach advertising), and the other relates to ensuring that adequate substance is embedded in Quaker form - as was the experience of the first Quakers.

Section 4 discusses notions for the 21<sup>st</sup> century - an unavoidable but brief excursion into theology (and moral philosophy) relevant to the future of Friends in Britain.

Section 5 seeks to discern the Quaker Way Ahead, seeking to take account of the views and experiences of younger Quakers.

Section 6 contains brief conclusions.

## SECTION 1

### IS THERE REALLY A PROBLEM NOW, WITH SO MANY RECENT CHANGES AND DEVELOPMENTS?

John Stephenson Rowntree sternly stuck to his task in 1859 and dwelt chiefly on the defects of Quakerism. It would have been more inviting employment, he said in his final chapter, to have unfolded the happier aspects under which Quakerism has displayed itself.

In the 21st century we will have no such scruples. British Quakers in the 21st century have made astonishing progress on many fronts (discussed below).

#### **Changes in forms:**

Restructuring of area and local meetings but also of fundamental central activities and committees. This has all been done with foresight and need not detain us now.

#### **Changes to some extent in substances as well as forms:**

The Framework for Action 2009–2014 was entitled *Together in worship and witness*. The seven headings outline priorities for the Society, after wide consultation: a. Strengthening the spiritual roots in our meetings and in ourselves; b. Speaking out in the world; c. Peace; d. Sustainability; e. Strengthening local communities; f. Crime, community and justice; g. Using our resources well.

Several specific paragraphs are of relevance to our present discussions, as follows. The ideas will be picked up later

One of the initial principles was that Friends at all levels need to respect the work of other bodies, throughout Britain and internationally, whether or not Quaker, work with them, learn from them and avoid ineffective duplication of their work.

We wish to see all our meetings being inclusive worshipping communities, where everyone is welcomed and valued. We all need to integrate and value the contribution of young people in all-age worship, in sharing our faith and in learning and listening. We wish to see meetings and individuals confidently expressing their Quaker faith and values wherever opportunities arise. We look to Quaker Communications Department and Quaker Life, as well as others with experience, to help members and meetings to make our faith known more widely.

Space does not permit here to give many details, but activities are expanding in many areas of the Society, both internally and externally. Such areas include Quaker Peace and Social Witness, Quaker Life, Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relations, Quaker Quest, and Woodbrooke courses including Becoming Friends aimed at newcomers.

British Yearly Meeting Gathering 2009 was a reverberating success with themes of “creating community” and “creating connections”, and the vanguard decision supporting same-sex marriage. Young Friends General Meeting functions alongside with its own active membership.

But all these exciting developments have taken place in the context of uncertainty and some anxiety about numbers of people within the Society. The word “numbers” sometimes mutates into the word “members” but not always. “Membership” is still a problem. note involuntary redundancies coming in some churches

Furthermore, who are the people being addressed by Quakers in these documents and activities? As John Punshon points out regarding the years after Rowntree’s essay in 1859,

**“The periodicals and conferences of the time contain erudite discussions of topics such as ‘the message of Quakerism’ or ‘Friends’ social witness today’ without a terribly clear idea of who apart from other Quakers were to receive the message and the witness.”**

## SECTION 2

### HOW MIGHT AN ONLOOKER - A SYMPATHETIC BUT PERHAPS RATHER WHIMSICAL ONLOOKER WITH A LOT OF INSIDE INFORMATION - VIEW 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY BRITISH QUAKERISM?

Both from the outside and from the inside, we are undoubtedly a mixed bag (including Quaker Fudge, to use Elsa Dicks's phrase, of which more later). The following are some plausible deductions the onlooker might make about who 21<sup>st</sup> century British Quakers are.

#### (1) The Green Party at prayer

Maude Royden was the secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation with other Christian pacifists during the war of 1914-18. She was a speaker on social and religious subjects, and in 1917 became assistant preacher at the City Temple in London, the first woman in that office. That was the year that she informed readers of The Times newspaper that "the Church should go forward along the path of progress and be no longer satisfied only to represent the Conservative Party at prayer."

Many press reports recently have declared that climate change is the new religion. There is almost complete overlap between Quaker testimonies and the philosophy of the UK Green Party. Alongside are groups such as Friends of the Earth. Our onlooker asks whether the Green Party are religious - but then also asks if Quakers are religious. And if some Green Party meetings were silent?

#### (2) The Quaker Interfaith Society

The first UK National Interfaith Week has just been held. During the week there was a conference at Windsor entitled "Many Heavens, One Earth : Faith Commitments for a Living Planet". The Friend reported: Together the nine religions represented some four billion people worldwide. Also participating were a range of secular environmental organisations. A comment was made that each faith tradition contains within its teachings, practices and foundational stories the seeds of particular witness it can make. Our onlooker asks whether Quakers were counted in the religions or in the secular organisations. And which faith tradition are Quakers in?

But we note that the Quaker Universalist group is well-established, and Timothy Peat Ashworth from Woodbrooke knows of no other place where this kind of honest, open dialogue between diverse faith positions is happening *within the one community*. Our onlooker hopes that the survival and influence of Interfaith or Universalist Quakers can be greater than the Theosophical Society.

#### (3) The Woodbrooke Banana Boutique

The list of Woodbrooke courses and activities (as already briefly considered) is impressive, and participation is clearly supportive to those who attend. But a strong message is being sent about The Whole Banana. Our onlooker asks if it is the same approach as the Interfaith or Universalist Quakers, and wonders about the Whole Banana Skin? What is left inside? Might we slip up on it?

#### (4) The Quaker Umbrella Shop

Our onlooker has understood that Quakers are inclined to try to be all things to all people - but wonders why people would choose a Quaker umbrella?

## (5) Power Truth Speakers

The phrase “speaking truth to power” originates from Friends although Larry Ingles points out that it goes back only 50 years. Our onlooker is impressed by work such as that of the Quaker United Nations Office, and the Quaker Council for European Affairs (which has just had its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary), as well as Quaker Peace & Social Witness with its wide British involvement including criminal justice and asylum. But are Quakers a major contributor to all these activities?

## (6) The Quaker Fudge Factory

There is a remarkable amount of activity going on - outlined in the previous paragraphs - whether viewed from the outside or the inside. But there is a lot of fudge involved within the Society. Ambiguity is often presented - very fairly - as a strength, but there are real questions as to how much real difference can be accommodated in one organisation. Some examples follow:

- The Meeting for Worship: If Quakers are unclear or take very different views about what if anything there is to ‘worship’, is the meeting in practice a largely silent meeting for fellowship or just ‘a meeting for friends’?
- The silence: Dandelion draws attention in several places to the “danger for liberal-Liberal Friends of silence no longer bringing presence into absence, but being in and of itself only silence”. He considers that “silence functions as the best approach to the unknown for a group highly wary of words.” Our onlooker is puzzled by the obvious enthusiasm of Quakers for words - lots of words, written or spoken - at all other times except the meeting for worship, and (our onlooker is informed) for a time at the margins of business meetings.
- Our onlooker is somewhat concerned, as are many of the onlooker’s Friends, about whether it is divisive or promoting of disunity for Dandelion to make even stronger statements such as, “There are those who will say that our unity lies in the silence of our meetings for worship, a silence beyond words and ideas. That silence can also be used as a cloak to cover up and smother our disunity, in which nothing considered ‘divisive’ can be uttered or done.”
- The Quaker business method: Dandelion goes on (in several meanings of that phrase): “The Meeting for Worship for business, for example, also based in silence, has traditionally been seen as a means to the discernment of the will of God. For those without a God or a God with a will, this formula is anachronistic. Instead, for these Friends, the business method is a temperamental or political preference.” That sounds almost unkind, but here is another way of construing the method.  
In the 2009 Swarthmore Lecture, Eccles writes, “If we understand God as a constructive creative force in the universe, then ‘seeking the will of God’ or ‘praying to be rightly led’ describe a process in which we seek so to align ourselves with that creative force which we call God that the decisions we make are constructive and creative. Inspiration may come from outside ourselves, from other people or from inner experience, but in the end the decision is ours. We have to create it.” Eccles then encourages us to be visionary - he quotes the beginning of an Ode by O’Shaughnessy (set to music by Elgar): *We are the music makers, And we are the dreamers of dreams*. Poetry and music are a special interest of our onlooker who points out that the end of that stanza runs: *Yet we are the movers and shakers Of the world for ever, it seems*. Our onlooker asks hopefully if that is how Quakers see ourselves.
- The spirit and ‘God language’: Our onlooker has detected that some Quakers consider that they cannot with integrity use traditional Christian or Quaker language such as ‘God’, ‘the Spirit’, ‘the divine’. But language like that crops up everywhere, and our onlooker is confused. (This issue of language is considered in more detail in Section 4,

our brief theological excursion below.)

- **Conflict:** Our onlooker was interested to hear that a recent use of the idea of 'Quaker fudge' was in the comments of a former Yearly Meeting Recording Clerk relating to conflict. "I find it ironic and sad that one of the hardest things for us to manage is conflict. (Some meetings) are prepared for some loving plain speaking. ... Without it we may put up with conflict for too long, hoping that the individuals concerned will mend their ways and the problem will pass. Sweeping a problem under the carpet does not work. That popular delicacy, Quaker fudge, can have a sour centre."
- **Membership:** Quaker Faith and Practice (11.01) describes membership as discipleship within a broadly Christian perspective. Our onlooker has read an American who suggests that membership should be based on whether one feels comfortable with the other members of the Meeting. Is that enough? Our onlooker has also noticed that meetings seem fairly uniform in terms of ethnicity and class - even perhaps age. Is there a problem?
- **The status of publications** such as Quaker Faith and Practice? Are these advisory only? Our onlooker is still reading QF&P with great interest.

This is all very jolly, and our whimsical onlooker is on balance impressed although often not clear about the special input which Quakers have to offer.

And there remain two unsettling questions. Who is doing all this? The number of people is small. And, to whom is the activity directed? We remember the concern of John Punshon, relating to 100 years ago, that we should be clear about who apart from other Quakers are to receive the message and the witness.



### SECTION 3

#### ONE THING IS MISSING (U) - BUT ANOTHER THING IS ALSO MISSING RELATING TO QUAKER FORM AND SUBSTANCE



It is certainly true that *U are missing* and that message is now going out (including some parts of the 'secular' press)

**JOINING** seems a very appropriate idea for a Society concerning about creating community and creating connections. But the idea which often attracts the label of 'proselytising' is very foreign to most British Quakers. However John Stephenson Rowntree would have nothing of that attitude. In his essay he went so far as to call statements such as "we are not a proselytising people" *pointless platitudes*. He saw it as a failure that the Society of his time was "unsuited to be a direct agency even in the promulgation of its most prominent tenets".

But a Young Quaker writing in *The Friend* about Britain Yearly Meeting 2009 had clearly got the message: "I like that Quakers do not proselytise or shout about their good work, but when we take momentous decisions or when we're campaigning on really important issues, shouldn't we attempt to make our voices heard?" And he even felt guilty for thinking that the same-sex marriage agreement would "boost the profile of Quakers" when the Friends House media relations team were publicly "chastised" for using the term 'Quaker brand'. The young John Wilhelm Rowntree might have had a retort for that crusty rebuke.

Diffidence? A survey of attenders (admittedly more than 20 years ago, as reported by Heron) saw Quakers as tending to be diffident and as seekers rather than finders; they were also thought to be poor communicators at a personal face-to-face level on matters of faith and experience (and diffidence is understandable as part of that).

This attitude may seem very British - it's not how African Quaker churches were planted by North American missions - but our Framework for Action prominently quotes (and thus promotes) the words of an American Friend: "To this day Friends everywhere disdain pressing their faith on others, preferring them to be led by the Spirit." Disdain! Being hyper-charitable and trying to allow for transatlantic differences in vocabulary, this reader still finds it extraordinary that the only alternative to being "led by the Spirit" (in a vacuum?) is portrayed as "pressing faith" - and in any case, is that to be condemned, never mind treated as contemptible?

Writing in *The Friend* recently, the partner of an enquirer (the partner being a church member) showed true Quaker hesitation and meekness: "It mystifies me that, in a world where many people are looking for a cause or faith to espouse, having been disenchanted by the established church, Friends hide their light rather than being open and proactive about their core values and testimonies. I understand that proselytising is not the Quaker style but at the risk of giving offence I dare to ask why?" Struggling for an answer to her own question, she continues with disarming, even devastating turns of phrase: "Is there perhaps some vested interest in remaining a small and almost exclusive minority group? What other reason could you have for not wooing the disillusioned or the unchurched when you have so much to offer?" Now there's a word for Quakers to add to our vocabulary about outreach - "wooing".

*Convincement* is an old word, perhaps out of fashion in concept not just vocabulary. There may often be a genuine but mistaken apprehension that outreach - and the assumed in-drag

that follows - can only be perceived by the outsiders as driven by dogma and the need for assent. Surely the removal of that misperception lies squarely in the hands of the Society.

Recent Quaker outreach, such as that with which this section began, seems to have avoided inviting misapprehension of this sort. But the question remains - what is the substance of the Quaker way which outsiders are to be asked to join? A brief excursion into 'notions' is necessary as we proceed to try to answer that question.

## SECTION 4

### NOTIONS FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AN UNAVOIDABLE BUT BRIEF EXCURSION INTO THEOLOGY (AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY) RELEVANT TO THE FUTURE OF FRIENDS IN BRITAIN

#### **The Quaker Testimonies - what are they, and where do they come from?**

An American Quaker asserts that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the testimonies became vague feel-good character traits - the now-famous SPICE testimonies of simplicity, peace, integrity, community and equality. "Who isn't in favour of all those values?", he asked.

It is true that some of the traditional words can be rather broad and difficult to define precisely. The word 'justice' may have more potential content than 'equality', and 'sustainability' is an important but relatively recent addition and expansion to the list. But the answer to the rather cynical question about who isn't in favour is - regrettably there seem to be many people and some cultures who aren't committed to these values.

In addition to the foundational ideas about society (and religion) which developed in and around and after the first Quakers, we can look to 21<sup>st</sup> century moral philosophers for a basis the testimonies. Mary Warnock, for example, argues that *altruism* is the basis of ethics. In a metaphor attractive to Quakers, she says that ethics - and thence the values we view as testimonies - begin when people become aware of themselves and imaginatively aware of others; and see that, first their own society, then human beings at large, are all in the same boat, and it is a precarious boat that will sink if there is no co-operation among those who are on board.

Integrity and justice are the fundamentals - then peace, and community, and sustainability, and simplicity, follow on.

#### **Theology - transcendence, immanence, relationships and humanism**

In the Friend in August 2009 Sarah Pearce described how "the silence of Meeting for Worship can help reawaken the Divine Presence". She believed that there may be many other Friends who have similar views and experiences. She regretted that talking about these experiences was often met with "bafflement and, sometimes, even hostility" and felt drawn towards Catholicism although not leaving Quakerism behind, but "taking it with me to what feels like a place where I can find a closer relationship with God".

Writing 10 years ago, Harvey Gillman said, "Forget the Universalist - Christocentric debate, that's not where we are. Where we are ... is whether we can have a relationship with God or whether God is a personification, a metaphor for our highest ideals."

And very recently Andy Stoller in the Friend says that the Jewish faith and Quakerism are both "at their heart mystical religions, assuming the possibility of a direct relationship with God".

More formally, Felicity Kaal in the latest Friends Quarterly considers that "we need to articulate a transcendent - 2nd person - concept of God that embraces the wisdom of the traditions, the knowledge of science and the postmodern insights".

David Boulton thinks differently: "Modern radical religious humanism ... rationalises religion and enriches humanism. It dissolves the old differences between the sacred and the secular,

the human and the divine, the natural and the supernatural. It does not deify humanity, but it understands that our values are human values, and could be no other." He says further that "nonrealism, far from denying any reality to what we call the experience of God, actually affirms and cherishes the experience, defending it against a shallow reductionist materialism on the one front and the perils of an outmoded supernaturalism on the other". In another place he writes, "There is a long historical tradition which has located 'God' or 'the divine' within rather than beyond humanity: the tradition of radical immanentism, in which early Quakerism was born."

So there are very different views within the Society, and all are agreed that caution and humility are needed in discussions. Some may be unsettled by suggestions such as David Boulton's above that 'supernaturalism' is 'outmoded' (Don Cupitt in reviewing one of David Boulton's books dismisses what he calls 'crude supernaturalism'.

In reviewing David Boulton's absorbing discussion about reality - "Real like the daisies or real like I love you" it can be remarked that 'real like I love you' does seem to imply some sort of relationship. In any case there may be much to be said for the view of CS Lewis about distinctions. In *Perelandra*, the second part of his cosmic trilogy, his hero mused that "The whole distinction between things accidental and things designed, like the distinction between fact and myth, was purely terrestrial." Quakers might take such an overview of the debate about transcendence and immanence.

Enough of philosophical theology! Pascal, a contemporary of the first Quakers and variously called the first modern Christian or one of the first existential Christians, had a profound religious experience - a night of fire - in 1654; he sought and found the "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars." Quakers may join him in asking to be rescued from the God of philosophers and scholars - and may even seek experience and encounters in such a variety of circumstances as the Hebrew patriarchs.

### **The Judaeo-Christian tradition and the sayings of Jesus**

Concerning the Judaeo-Christian tradition of Quakers, Harvey Gillman writes (in *The Quaker way a vision for the new century 2008*): "I see the Quaker way as an internalisation and spiritualisation of the Judeo-Christian tradition which has learned to sit lightly with the old metaphors of divinity and may be open to new ones." He also says, "We live in a society of growing biblical and religious ignorance. The revolutionary understanding of early Friends was based on a serious exploration and reinterpretation of Christian history. We need as a Society not to base our outreach on outdated and ignorant pictures of other forms of Christianity and other religions."

The megaphone of 21st-century liberal-Liberal Quakers, David Boulton, at the very end of his tour de force *Who on earth was Jesus?* describes Jesus's "uniquely expressive parables and aphorisms (mangled by editors etc) ... After 2000 years of white noise, those who have ears to hear may still pick up the authentic voice of a man of his own age who somehow contrives to speak to ours." In another place Boulton wrote "What a makeover we could give this troubled world if we took this Jesus seriously! ... Jesus lives, in his teaching."

Paul Oestreicher in the *Friend* a year ago said, "Jesus ... is the inspired teacher who personified love and therefore God. Alone among religious teachers he proclaimed a love that was total and unconditional, that broke down all human barriers, that made no distinction between friend and foe, that lived out limitless forgiveness. He challenged the corruption of power, religious and secular. For this he paid the classical price that good people do and have done down the ages."

The sayings of Jesus are frequently mentioned by Quakers, often obliquely. Michael Bartlett

writing very recently on Quakers and Human Rights refers to the call in the *Sermon on the Mount* 'to go the second mile' (and) the parable of the *Good Samaritan*. The parable is also referred to in the Frontpiece of the Friends Quarterly in November 2009: "And where does that distinctiveness come from, which both sets us apart and yet still compels us in our daily lives not to *pass by on the other side*?"

And Harvey Gillman in the Quaker Way says, "I see Friends in general as a place of hospitality, an idea of .. spiritual liberation, ... in the words of Jesus: bringing life, and life in abundance."

*The Lost Gospel Q: the original sayings of Jesus* shows (says Thomas Moore in the Introduction) "a Jesus who is less shielded and packaged by later traditions, less nuanced by the purposes of well-intentioned institutions, and therefore more poetic and more sublimely relevant to my own desire for a truly intelligent, deeply felt and socially responsive life of spirit." In the Preface Marcus Borg writes, "The sayings in Q most often speak of the way or path that Jesus taught, a way deeply subversive of the dominant cultural consciousness of his day, and perhaps of every day. Here was a form of early Christianity ... that centrally emphasized "The Way".

So Quakers of all persuasions can be attracted to the sayings and the way of Jesus.

### **Transformation**

Convincement is not a common word these days, and 'conversion' which is a modern synonym is even less popular. But Harvey Gillman's vision is of a Quaker community that is "open to the possibility of *transforming* encounter with Spirit". In earlier days Rufus Jones remarked that "no philosophy can remake men and fill them with power". Our Society now needs power - and wisdom - as much as ever before in its extraordinary history. For some this implies a spiritual relationship, but elaborating notions will not produce the desired and necessary experiences.

## SECTION 5

### THE QUAKER WAY AHEAD SEEKING TO TAKE ACCOUNT OF THE VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF YOUNGER QUAKERS

#### **A little of what younger Quakers have said recently**

*Young Friends General Meeting* in 2009 have written, "Basically we're like a roving miniature Friends House, but considerably sexier!"

They went on, "We engage in charitable appeals, think long and hard about community, outreach, proper business method and spirituality, just like you. Some of you might have met us at Yearly Meeting Gathering in York. Our presence there was part of a concerted effort to raise our profile within the Yearly Meeting, both to encourage attendance at our events, and to offer our insights into issues with which we feel we deal successfully as a community. Things we are quite good at include: Quaker business method, community building and accessibility. Things we worry about include: how we deal with newcomers, our outreach methods, and our diminishing attendance figures."

Another Young Quaker looking at the 2009 Yearly Meeting no doubt shared the enthusiasm of many. "I couldn't help but think (about the same-sex marriage agreement) 'this will make the headlines' and 'this will boost the profile of Quakers'... I like that Quakers do not proselytise or shout about their good work, but when we take momentous decisions or when we're campaigning on really important issues, shouldn't we attempt to make our voices heard?"

The Young Friends General Meeting website has a section aimed at newcomers: Are you searching for meaning in life? Are you looking for a group to support you in your spiritual search? Do you long for peace and justice? Are you spiritual but not 'churchy'? Are you looking for something different?

So where will the continued inspiration and guidance and example in the Quaker way come from for younger Quakers? A 15 year old from Glasgow recently wrote, "I never personally understood the big silences, though I suppose they can be relaxing when you need to clear your head or get something off your chest to a big group of people who are staring at you like you are the ugly duckling. My mum described the silences as a means of clearing the soul and the mind, which I suppose is useful when stressed or worried. It's actually very surprising how many uses it has, but regrettably I have to admit I, along with the majority of the younger generation, have never really seen it as a means of clarity, but more a chance to recite over what was on TV last night or to catch the attention of another teenager at the opposite end of the room."

#### **Meeting for worship and other meetings - can they be all-age?**

John Stephenson Rowntree was very critical of long silent meetings - he considered them especially unsuitable for younger people.

So why is the traditional British Meeting for Worship 60 minutes long? Admittedly the quite young are often released after 15 minutes, and special meetings are often shorter. But is there an intermediate between programmed and unprogrammed worship, with possibly part prepared? It is vital for teenagers and young adults even more than young children to participate as part of their growing in understanding and following the Quaker way. Cannot teaching about the Quaker way be included in some of this prepared time without making

people feel that the unprogrammed meeting is being abandoned?

The concept and practice of 'Afterthoughts' is one way of encouraging younger Quakers to contribute without feeling they have to meet up to some cryptic (or 'wall-felling' as Rowntree remarked) standard of 'ministry'. An Afterthoughts time could take up the second 30 minutes of a 60 minute meeting for worship, if elders agreed.

Elders are to be encouraged to fulfil their responsibilities for ministry in creative ways. 'Worship sharing' might similarly be linked with meeting for worship. Both Afterthoughts and sharing are constrained to some extent by numbers, but elders might well be pleased to have a challenge of thinking how to deal with large numbers.

### **What do we want our younger friends to become?**

Given the great issues of our time, it must be desirable for us to have members working in (not just working with) criminal justice system including police and prison services; and in business and finance, and in politics. Participation in the new Power2010 enterprise will be valuable but we need to encourage our young people to consider these challenging areas of work - not just the caring and health professions and education. We can encourage other churches and faith groups to similarly encourage their young people

But who are the role models for us all? We need to reach out with grace and conviction and commitment to encourage and enable people currently working in these challenging areas to join us - not just in principle but also to join our Society. This will not be 'poaching' (or proselytising in one of its formal senses) if we do not require people to leave or abandon any existing affiliation. We need them, and we should be able to show and tell them why they need to be with us.

### **Outreach to younger and older people**

People will be attracted by clarity of purpose and commitment - but less so if we appear to be no different to other committed groups.

To be a study centre for faith and action in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an honourable thing - but an institution such as Woodbrooke can fulfil that function independently of any society of friends.

To be a section of the green party (with an interest in having some silent meetings) is an honourable way - but it is hard to see that it is necessary or efficient to have a separate society. To be an Interfaith Society is an honourable way - but it is hard to see how that role might be maintained by a small group which sees itself as neither a faith group nor a secular group;

So who do we reach out to, both younger and older?

- *to the Church?* Paul Oestreicher is perhaps the best known of a large number who have been able to maintain - at least for some time - involvement with Quakers as well as a traditional church of one variety or another  
Quakers have vital messages for the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and we share many of the same challenges - to numbers but also to clarifying their mission. We must all avoid simply in the business of self-preservation, although involuntary redundancies may soon be affecting more than the church (of England).
- *to Jewish people?* A friend has recently related her experience of training to convert to Judaism: "the rhythms of the liturgy and the music of the prayers were where I felt closest to the Spirit". There are many Quakers currently with Jewish roots (some referred to in the current presentation). Might we be willing and able to say to Jewish

- people, "Join us" as well as "Shalom aleichem"?
- o *to Muslim people?* Might we be willing and able to say to Muslim people, "Join us" as well as "Asalaam Alaykum"? And might we even rise to the challenge of discussion with Hizb ut Tahrir (the milder criticisms of which by former adherents e.g. Ed Husain include the words 'martial' and 'violent') when they wish to use Friends House in London, in the same way that we might have courage, grace and wisdom to engage with the BNP?
- o *to other faith groups?* But why would they wish to join us?
- o *the community, local and national (and international)?* Our outreach activity can know no limits.

We can continue and expand the excellent work of Quaker Quest, Becoming Friends, and commercial advertising. But we need to invite people - including 'attenders' - to become members. We should not postpone the invitation; the step is of uncertain purpose, or difficult, for long-term attenders but newcomers need not be left for more than a year or so without a direct invitation to join.

We need to overcome diffidence - seekers need not be diffident when inviting others to join us in the pilgrimage, the search, the way.

We need to put aside disdain and phobia of the idea of 'proselytising'.

We need to remember the idea of conviction even if new words are used, such as "understanding the Quaker way".

We can helpfully emphasise that membership is of a large group - Britain as well as a more local area.

### **Our core book - Quaker Faith and Practice - is being continually revised**

Regular updating is now agreed in principle. But the current situation - galvanised by the recent decision about same-sex marriage - provides an opportunity for a more radical revision. But this needs to be shorter and simpler; more detail is needed than *Advices and Queries* but much can be taken out into a supplement.

As the prophet Habakkuk says, "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it."

The renowned postscript to the epistle from the Elders at Balby in 1656 seems often to be misused. The content of the epistle has considerable detail but it is all written with grace and humility. It is hard to see that anyone interested in walking in the light could differ about any detail. The Elders conclude their postscript with a quotation from the second letter of the apostle Paul to the Corinthian church, where his train of thought is that the church members themselves "are a letter ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." The attitude of the Elders is thus not what we might think of as take-it-or-leave-it, or cherry-pick what you like, but very much that "these things may be fulfilled" - their use of the words of Paul is to emphasise that this fulfilling, which they expected, will be "in the Spirit" and not attempted with stony hearts.

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

A revised QFP could be produced *and accepted* by meetings and members with such an



attitude - the spirit giving grace and power to meet the aspirations of the society. Yearly Meeting with Area Meetings need to agree that members are expected to be in general agreement with the contents. Rowntree pointed out that some centralisation is needed for effective outreach, and postmodern Quakers have sat on the fence as to whether Quakers are an open or a closed society.

### **Public relations and the press as part of outreach**

Geoffrey Durham wrote very recently that doubted the validity of the expression he often heard from British Friends, "When people are ready, they'll find us." And the public survey to be reported a few days after the deadline for submission of the present discussion confirms the views so far presented in this discussion of the need for communication and explanation as part of outreach. One statistic will suffice: 23% thought that the Quakers are 'a closed group'.

The news piece in the Friend about the forthcoming report asks whether the majority of British Friends' traditional suspicion of evangelism has led to a failure accurately to communicate the central messages of the faith. The answer is surely "Yes".

Here is part of *The curious case of Yearly Meeting and the media* as written by Rosemary Harthill in the Friend after BYMG 2009: "Another irony was that even though one of the seven priorities of the framework for action is 'speaking out in the world', yet again no non-Quaker reporter was allowed in, even for the decision to support same-sex marriage. It appears that the obvious way of remedying their ignorance of our business method is to prevent them from experiencing it and then complain about any inaccuracies in reporting."

Many Friends were understandably concerned about how outsiders would interfere with the right ordering and discernment of meetings. But creative use is needed of our Quaker principles and guidelines - and elders.

Section 6.15 of Quaker Faith and Practice says about Yearly Meeting: "Permission for the attendance of non-members at one or more sessions may be given at the discretion of the clerk, if satisfied that their presence is likely to be of service to the Society. Such permission should be sought well in advance of Yearly Meeting and should be supported by one or more elders to whom the applicant is well known. ... Elders supporting applications should ensure that non-members receive suitable support and guidance to enable them to be of service and to benefit from attendance at Yearly Meeting."

It is not difficult to envisage how, for example, media religious correspondents could be befriended by elders in London or elsewhere. Useful relationships might be established, which would in addition permit both the spirit and the letter of these requirements for Yearly Meeting to be fulfilled. Doves can in fact be wise as well as harmless.

### **Inspired and inspiring**

We can conclude this section by noting the conclusion of the Epistle from Britain Yearly Meeting Gathering 2009:

*God calls us to make the most of what we have; ... to be inspired and inspiring.*

## SECTION 6

### BRIEF CONCLUSIONS

The primary emphasis of this discussion has been that our Society needs to reach out. But the conclusions will consider first the Quaker way so that we will be clear about what we are inviting people to join and why.

#### **More on "The Quaker way"**

It is possible that the Society will not survive beyond another 20 years or so. Fervent supporters of the Society such as Harvey Gillman accept with equanimity that if our institution dies out in one form, the principles for which we stand will be resurrected in another. And many members will gladly work with or join other organisations - existing or yet to be formed - which share some of those principles.

But if there is to be survival, by necessity associated with outreach and invitations to join the Quaker way, it needs to be supported by clear descriptions of what that way is.

In his essay of 1859 John Stephenson Rowntree alludes to a well-known verse in the book of the prophet Micah in the Hebrew scriptures. What is required is: "to live justly, to value commitment, and to walk humbly with your God." The present essay has proposed that comprehensible and communicable content can be given to all three parts of this prophetic text - for theists and non-theists and church members and members of other faiths and people of our country and others - by seeing that our spiritual way is in accord with the way of Jesus; not a Jesus of theology but (in the words of a religious humanist Quaker) a man of his own age with an authentic voice who somehow contrives to speak to ours. This is not a step towards dogma or a creed; it is a step in line with Quaker traditions down the centuries and around the world, and in accord with the documents of British Quakers in 2009. This can, it is proposed, be incorporated in an inclusive manner in a shortened and agreed summary of our faith and practice, and that practice both within the Society and outside, must reflect it.

#### **More on "Join us!"**

Evidence as well as argument for the need to reach out - to invite people to join us - has never been so strong. We must overcome understandable diffidence and mistaken concern that our inclusive way will be perceived as dogma. But we need to be able to explain what it is that we are inviting people to join, and why. If all or even part of the section immediately above is accepted then we have a message, and a group of testimonies, with which we can confidently approach people of any faith or none.

#### **These two must happen together**

The Religious Society of Friends in Britain in 2009 is active in developing outreach. And there is manifest weariness about yet more discussions about the Quaker 'identity'. The new approach of this essay is to submit that urgent thought and work must be given to both *at the same time and in a co-ordinated manner*, with a willingness for fundamental changes in both form and substance along the lines suggested here, if the Society is not to fade into extinction as an entity. The testimonies - and a Quaker way of life and thought - will not be extinguished, but the Society might no longer be the vehicle for their expression if both form and substance are not changed.

## Sources

In addition to numerous quotations from John Stephenson Rowntree's essay of 1859, the pages contain many brief references by name to books and/or authors. Many quotations, mostly directly acknowledged, are taken from *The Friend* and some from the *Friends Quarterly*.

Reference has also been made to many books, in particular the following:

David Boulton: *Real like the daisies or real like I love you?* and *Who on earth was Jesus?*

Pink Dandelion: *An Introduction to Quakerism, The Quakers - A Very Short Introduction, and The Liturgies of Quakerism*

Alastair Heron: *Quakers in Britain, and On Being a Quaker*

John Punshon: *Portrait in Grey*

