

Will the Religious Society of Friends Survive the 21st Century?

THE TITLE OF this essay is the most pertinent question facing Friends today since it mirrors our difficult and confusing times. As a species we have entered a new 'post' age; post-modern relativism, post-industrialism and the ecological crisis are all pervasive and Friends are among those who are sensitive to the problems and challenges raised as a result. In many ways, this 'post' age is scary but if I have one aim here it is to assure Friends that there is something we carry within us all that brings hope, coherence and direction. However, that 'something' means I will of necessity create a degree of unease among some Friends. I will invoke the message and witness of Jesus (Yeshua), the Jewish sage. I do so with sincere consideration for those who have been hurt by mainline Christianity. But I ask you to bear with me for a moment by quietly, together, remembering this gem from Luke 17: 21 from the King James Bible:

Neither shall they say, 'Lo here!' or, 'lo there!' for, behold, the Kingdom is within you.

Let us first substitute 'Presence of Love' for 'Kingdom' and then modernise some of the language¹:

No need to look here or there!; the Presence of Love is *within* you.²

I hope you agree that the passage now has a different 'feel', that it is more 'welcoming'. But if we can go beyond its language and the psychology it implies, there is something deeper to discover. It is what the first Friends found all those years ago because Luke 17: 21 was not only a favourite of theirs but was fundamental to the growth of their Testimony. I will argue that it is also fundamental for us in these 'post' times and for the future of Friends: there is, after all, nothing 'post' about the *magna carta* of the Kingdom/Presence of Love, the Sermon on the Mount. This may be found in Matthew's short chapters 5-7, probably the most subversive literature ever written as it enunciates Jesus' revolutionary politics of compassion, a politics whose dynamism continues to confront the principalities and powers, a politics that gifts us with a coherent theology, purpose and direction and the common language we crave.

The Presence of Love, the Kingdom of God, is prophetic. It calls us to an awakening, deep reflection and renewal. It calls us to be prophets to our own times so we may carry our Lamb's War, our heartfelt and tested concerns, into the world knowing *why* we are doing so, knowing the Presence of Love is the basis of our spiritual life as Friends together. It calls us into unity and wholeness. Of course, we must first *hear* the call and be aware of what it is actually saying to us.

This essay is divided into three sections. Section A looks briefly at the nature of the Kingdom/Presence of Love. We will find it possesses a dynamic and revolutionary politics of compassion which Friends will recognise. It will be important in Section B to look at how our religious forebears understood and lived the concept. Section C is devoted to the future of our Society by way of a pictorial aid in the form of the Indo-Tibetan *dharmachakra*. In general, I argue that in re-discovering the lost radiance of the Kingdom modern Friends will be gifted with a cohesive theology, the outcome of which will be a revitalised Religious Society built on a foundation of rock. Thus, with a new sense of purpose and vigour for its

mission in the world, Friends will be better able to face the future with confidence and the expectation of spiritual and numerical growth.

A. The Kingdom of God/Presence of Love

Logion 113 of the Gospel of Thomas has a Kingdom of God ‘spread upon the earth’ but unnoticed by most. In addition, both it and the Sermon on the Mount, have often been corrupted. All this is strange considering the Presence of Love was the *raison d’être* for Jesus’ mission, for his life and death, for his testimony to unity with, and wholeness, in God. Strange also, because his death, which was primarily for Love, and his spiritual resurrection were affirmations from the Christ/Spirit within him of the loving Presence of Love as eternal life (Jn.3:15), of the very majesty of Love itself for us all. And stranger still since the Kingdom of God as concept is almost unknown among Friends today despite the early Quakers’ happy obsession with it.

The Presence of Love/Kingdom to which the Synoptic Gospels in particular refer includes the experience of Divine righteousness-justice, peace, mercy and spiritual joy and their enactment in the world, an enactment usually in opposition to human reasoning and in their propensity to confront the world’s principalities and powers. Considered counter-cultural, therefore, as all prophetic pronouncements in the Hebrew tradition, the Presence of Love differed radically from what passed as religion and politics including their accepted structures. It continues to be revealed by those in the Christ/Spirit—Christian or not—who enact it. Familiar figures spring to mind—Martin Luther King Jr., Desmond Tutu and the Burmese Buddhist and political leader, Aung San Sui Kyi. Such people, exemplars of the ‘great commission’, enhance the prophetic tradition.

While always experienced in the now, the Presence of Love calls us from the past through remembered witness but also from the future when all that is of the One will be consummated in the One ‘in the fullness of time’. The Presence of Love, therefore, rises above time and place and is visionary as it is universal.

Both it and the Sermon make significant, though not impossible, demands of each one of us. Jesus expected the literal implementation of the Sermon’s ethics because he well knew the practicality of their transformative initiatives for reconciliation and healing (including with enemies) in underlining the on-going, nonviolent revolution he was inaugurating. The Sermon, therefore, is no interim ethic.

Jesus, like the author(s) of Thomas’ Gospel, knew from his own religious tradition that the Kingdom was already incarnate in the world where, with human help, it constantly awaited unveiling. The ancient Greek for ‘coming’ or ‘unveiling’, *apokálupsis*, is frequently misunderstood as meaning ‘the end of the world is nigh’. But Apocalyptic conveys the End- or Last-times in the sense of an end to our old destructive ways of thinking and behaviour which create barriers between the Divine and ourselves. Does this not speak to our condition today in these ‘post’ times? The Divine needs us for the work of spiritual (and earthly) restoration, not only for working the Presence of Love into our daily experiences but also to encourage its understanding and enactment in other people’s lives and our planet home. The early Quakers dubbed this process ‘addressing that of God [and the Kingdom] in everyone’. If we celebrate the Kingdom of God in this way, we will find strength in the struggle towards the transformation of life on earth so that it reflects ‘heaven’ or, put another way, Love’s design. The Presence of Love is redemptive, therefore, and thus leads to salvation, that is to

say, to wholeness and unity with the One. As such, the Presence of Love is incarnational and resurrectional and profoundly this-worldly in consequence.

The Presence of Love appears where one least expects it, where the Divine/Love happens, the same Love who brings justice, peace and mercy. It constitutes the good news that is ever near, about a Love that is beyond calculation. 'In it', writes Mennonite Fernando Enns, is found our hope that

violence can actually be overcome because this hope . . . changes the way we look at the world . . . And it is this altered perspective which creates the motivation to try to overcome violence, to take courageous steps against all apparent odds, and opens the way for us to reinterpret our own experience. The knowledge that it is given to us to be part of this Kingdom can be a source of comfort and strength that will keep us from flagging in our efforts to break the cycles of violence and to join in building the communities of peace.³

The reported activity of Jesus in healing disease, expelling demons, teaching a new ethic for living and offering new hope in God to the poor, the lonely and oppressed in the wake of evil's apparent invincibility is understood as a demonstration of the Kingdom of God in action, particularly among those who stand against 'empire' with all its destructive might. Interestingly, more than 60 biblical chapters reflect a negative view of empire and they are presented as the antithesis of compassion.

Compassion as Revolutionary Politics

Our use of 'politics' often brings to mind the manifestos of manipulatory, technologically-hyped mass political party machines. The followers of the Presence of Love have always held a different worldview in which social, economic, spiritual and political concerns and interaction are based squarely on Divine justice, peace and compassion, on relationships that are equitable and harmonious in the Spirit.

Jesus' own political and religious outlook was naturally determined by his Hebrew tradition. From Maccabees, for instance, he learnt that the Kingdom of God was in constant revolt against the power of Mammon but that it was an earthly yet spiritual reality. He understood the 'messiah' as the one anointed to bring God's justice and love to all people, especially the sick and marginalized, the poor in general. In this respect, he was acquainted with the prophets as God's messengers, ready to remind everyone of their covenantal obligations with YHWH which they could easily neglect and usually at the expense of justice, peace and mercy. Like Jesus, the prophets were hardly timid in opposing oppression, in demanding radical social and political change. The way in which the Law Codes and Psalms promoted and legislated for such social and economic parity also helped Jesus formulate his view of the Kingdom and thus *reformulate* his experience and knowledge of *Mitzvah* (God's commandments) and the Torah.⁴ Jesus, however, was not nomistic. His intimate relationship with the Divine downplayed the Law thus elevating the Divine (along with mercy and forgiveness) for men and women, and, one may argue, for the Creation. Consequently, the Mosaic Law becomes the Law of the heart. It was a radical departure, a re-discovery of Jeremiah 31:34 which was also a favourite of the first Friends.⁵

For Divine Love to be present (to be 'at hand'), Jesus added another important factor—personal transformation which was possible only with the help of the Spirit. It involved repentance in the sense of giving up one's own agenda (fears, ego) and trusting completely in God. Transformation could trigger a *kenosis* or an 'emptying', what the early Quakers would call 'convincement', involving a turning away from the world and its potential to divert or corrupt. Transformation gave enormous spiritual authority to individuals and thence to their communities, something the hereditary priesthood was quick to understand and would come to fear. For his part, Jesus was in no doubt that as each person was authentically *in* the Presence of Love s/he was of the royal priesthood, a true 'king'—of mercy. Hence, one's politics needed to conform to the Presence of Love which he demonstrated by his healings and exorcisms, eschatological meals (giving hope to sinners), inclusivity (to women, strangers, gentiles), opposition to domination and thus to class and economic inequality. These could have no place in the Presence of Love. The revolutionary politics of Jesus were, therefore, fundamentally of compassion and may be understood, it seems to me, as:

1. Being constantly in the service of humanity and giving voice to the voiceless; exposing the structures and works of oppression. Caring for the well-being of others with steadfast love.
2. Advocating and demonstrating social and economic justice—for instance, a redistribution of land and wealth.
3. Never to elevate Caesar and other icons above God.
4. Speaking Truth to power (inc. political, military, ecclesial authority).
5. Promotion of inclusivity and equity in opposing discrimination caused by hierarchies, as well as gender, age or class bias.
6. Advocating and demonstrating non-violence. Keeping one's heart and mind free of the seeds of war.
7. Creating alternatives to violence: being a means of transformation, reconciliation and healing.
8. Being constantly in prayer.
9. Willing to live the Presence of Love/Kingdom as a priority and as already present.
10. Letting one's life speak, therefore, and being willing to die like Jesus for Love if necessary.

Transformation in the way we have described meant the end of exile, a 'returning home to within' as the first Friends called it.⁶ Does not the Society today seek to return home to a sense of purpose and direction, to centredness?

From the Synoptic Gospels, then, we know that the Presence of Love is the Divine intention for the universe, God's desire that all humans live harmoniously as brothers and sisters, as sons and daughters of God, with each other. Our thoughts and actions can either be in tune with this desire or not. Only by being so, we are told, will we come to know true fulfillment. For this to occur, prayer, discernment and knowledge and experience of the living Christ/Spirit are essential. In the Quaker context, UK Friend Janet Scott says that 'the Meeting for Worship . . . is both a sign of the Kingdom of God and a means to it.'⁷ Meeting for Worship is not a 'quiet time' or a 'quiet space'. These are secular notions. In Meeting for Worship we enter into relationship with, and do the work of, the Kingdom of God. Liberation theologian Jon Sobrino calls this relationship the 'most fundamental structure of historical

reality'.⁸ It is a reality that often appears weak and yet stands constantly and resolutely against the anti-Kingdom, the principalities and powers when they lie, cheat, oppress and kill. It stands against anything that does violence to the in-breaking of Divine Love.

B. The Early Quaker Kingdom of God

Like Jesus and the disciples, the principle goal of the early Friends was to preach the Kingdom/Presence of Love and to live it. For them it had always been present even 'before Jesus was'.⁹ Like the Christ (the Light, Divine Love), the Kingdom of God was changeless, from everlasting to everlasting.

The first Friends used the term 'Kingdom of God' many times. Between 1652 and 1662 approximately 1,000 of their works were published. Of 800+ of these on my list, 735 are by authors with 20+ works to their name. Of these, 88% refer (and often more than once) to 'Kingdom' or its equivalent expressions (e.g. Law of God, Dominion/Sovereignty of God).¹⁰ The Friends equated the Kingdom of God with the Second Coming (*Parousia*) which they believed had already taken place and was ever-revealing: 'Christ is come and is coming'. Their experience taught them that as they became more authentic in the life of prayer both the Presence of Love and the inner *Parousia* were inextricably linked to their understanding and pursuit of inward and outer peace (Jer. 31:33). Their attempts at reaching the Light in 'all people' meant addressing the Presence of Love within them as well as manifesting it in the 'carnal' world as the Lamb's War.

The early Quaker revolution still resonates with critical authority because the confident act of faith that underlined it was never desire or belief only but a faith that expressed discipleship, the *doing* of Truth and Justice, an orthopraxis that inherently reached beyond time and space. The theology of our Testimony to peace, therefore, is fundamentally that of the Presence of Love. The Jesus at its centre is the down-to-earth Nazarene of Matthew, the cosmological Jesus of John, Revelation and Paul (see Col. 1:20), and the victorious Lamb over the principalities and powers of Paul and Revelation (Rev. 2:26). US Friend Sandra Cronk writes:

The war of the Lamb leads us towards the peaceable kingdom, the era of shalom, which includes justice, mercy, and fullness and well-being for human life. But the peaceable kingdom is not just in the future. It is now. So the Lamb's War speaks to the present quality of peace by its almost shocking use of paradoxical imagery. Putting the 'Lamb' and 'war' together seems incongruous and even nonsensical. Christ is the Lamb. We have seen how he refused to use any coercive or manipulative power to secure his goals or ensure the success of his ministry. On the contrary, the true power of his ministry was revealed through his suffering on the cross. We are left with the paradoxical question, 'How can a defenceless Lamb wage war?'¹¹

The answer is found in Jesus' example and teaching, particularly the Sermon and death and resurrection. It is, of course, given voice by acting with love, justice, compassion, patience, purity, trust and humility as 'babes' of Light; by being disciples.¹² We cannot create such love in ourselves alone.

One early Friend who 'defined' the Kingdom of God was Francis Howgill from present-day Cumbria in England's north. In a beautiful passage in *Some of the Mysteries of God's*

Kingdom (1658) he evoked Jeremiah 32:40 in describing an everlasting Kingdom replete with 'purity' which

comes to be felt working in the heart, and as it is loved and obeyed, it leads and converts the heart, to the Lord, and draws towards itself, out of unholiness, and from under the dark power.¹³

The Kingdom of God/Life, he said, was home to those who were formerly exiled, home to those spiritual refugees who now knew the balm of Divine righteousness/justice, peace (and peace of conscience), joy, felicity, pleasantness, virtue, eternal life, assurance of God's love, comfort and consolation, eternal dignity, quietness, grace and hope.¹⁴ It was, he continued,

eternal brightness shed abroad through all things which pierces through and searches the (most) secret place, even that which is invisible, and makes manifest all things. And the nature of everything by the day of the Lord comes to be seen, and it appears in the heart. (People are) to wait for the day to dawn . . . (for) that which makes evil manifest and brings it to light.¹⁵

The 'Day of the Lord' was the Kingdom. It was 'pure Light' already actively with its justice and the possibility of regeneration. The Day's grace was free as 'God's appearance' and it satiated the hunger and thirst for righteousness within. It placed people in the world but on a different path to it and thus nearer to God. Describing his own experience in finding the Presence of Love at long last, Howgill was amazed at the depth of unity with others with whom he was 'caught up as in a net'. Expressing the same idealism they may have found in the prophet Isaiah 58:6-8, he exclaimed:

And from that day forward our hearts were knit unto the Lord, and one unto another in true and fervent love, not by any external covenant or external form but we entered into the covenant of Life with God. And that was as a strong obligation or bond upon all our spirits which united us one unto another . . . in the unity of the Spirit and of the bond of peace.¹⁶

Their corporate unity was of supreme importance and through it the covenant of death was 'disannulled' by the 'power and arm' of Divine Love. It meant a new 'babe' could be born 'from above'. The begotten of the Kingdom were 'heirs to the promise' as they unveiled the new covenant within.¹⁷

Acknowledging that words could never fully describe the ineffable, he affirmed them as mere sounds, veils that covered the true beauty and meaning of this spiritual 'habitation', the 'treasure house of wisdom'. All who partook of 'the Divine nature' received this 'Wisdom of Life', 'Power and Virtue' and would be filled with 'Life'.¹⁸ To be of the Kingdom was to live in the Spirit as a prophet.

The Kingdom, being within as the Friends understood Jesus to have said, meant that one must 'dig deep, sweep clean and search narrowly' to discover the pearl, the mustard seed, the lost piece of silver. These, and especially the pearl, represented for the Friends the advent of the Kingdom/Covenant from its small beginnings, the anticipation of the inner and outer worlds being turned upside down, a reversal of fortune anticipated in the Beatitudes. This

demanded faithfulness which involved an awareness of God's nearness, a patient waiting in the peace and righteousness of the Spirit. The Quaker Way is commensurate with this practice but the Presence of Love must always be earned.

Acceptance of the Presence of Love meant the end of the inner old world. It placed the now and future in relation to the saving activity of the Spirit together with the birth, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension and glorification of Jesus, all of which they understood spiritually. As we have seen, the Kingdom/Presence of Love was independent of time and space, and so, by definition, could not end. The Presence of Love, then, could never be a short-term event or experience because God/Love alone was its eternal and ever-immanent inspiration. That is to say, the Divine could be incarnated at any point in time, or, more precisely, at a point always in the present with the future at its centre. By cutting across time, Fox believed Jesus had liberated the God from 'history', symbolically bound so far within the strictures of the Mosaic Law.

Only by willingly accepting the Light would the Kingdom of God cover the earth. Walking the Kingdom of peace, equality and truth was to be their sole vocation, just as it was Jesus'. They were to bring the Kingdom to 'all people on the earth'. Matthew 5-7 and the Epistle of James—into which the Sermon on the Mount was partially incorporated—provided the ethical basis of their Lamb's War that led to that same unity and wholeness in God, to unity with each other, as well as with all humanity and Creation. In this way, they would fulfil Divine intention. The Kingdom bespoke a worshipping community discerning the will (loving desire) of God. It was the way of perfection because perfection, only possible through the Light, was attainable in this life. .

By claiming to abolish the old history and creating a new one, Fox and the Friends were zealous in restoring the spiritual revolution of Jesus by bringing the future to the present so that hope could be manifest in Love and liberation. Like Jesus, the Friends were prophets of hope. The image and fear of the outer, physical End, so common in those days, could now be replaced by the nearness and security of the inner End-time that would free individuals from the old dispensation which still lingered in the 'world's corruption' and which 'struck at (their) heart'. In this way they wished to redeem time. Here was the most potent of brews for turning the world upside down and which has clear resonance in today's fractured world.

C. Re-discovering the Lost Radiance: the Future of Quakerism

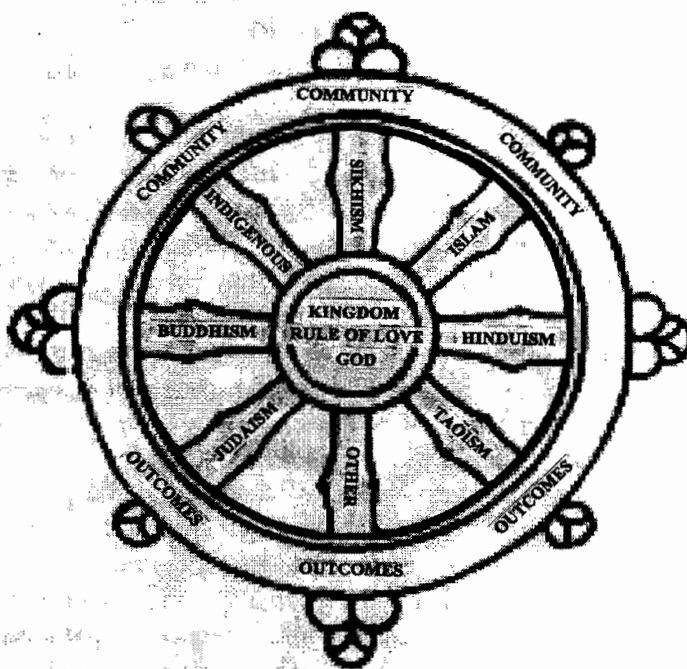
What lessons may we draw for today from the early Quaker witness for the Kingdom of God? The growth and development of early Quaker Testimony is a distillation of the Kingdom, essentially in its promulgation as Jesus' two commandments (the *Shema*) and the Sermon on the Mount. Though there were different emphases in belief, the Friends enjoyed a theological coherence because the Presence of Love was something upon which they could all agree.¹⁹

Addressing the needs of the present and future of our Society I not wish to entertain any of the controversies currently bedevilling it for they are mere 'jangleings' as Fox used to say. Instead, by way of illustration, I will use the Indo-Tibetan *dharmachakra*, the Buddhist representation of right movement, to demonstrate the way in which the Kingdom (or Rule, Presence) of Love can be at the heart of our diversity.

As a 'wheel of the Law' the *dharmachakra* is transformational. Let us assume its hub represents the central and centring focus of our Religious Society—the Kingdom, the Law of

the New Covenant. Each spoke carries the message of the Kingdom of God within non-Christian traditions, in Christian denominations and expressions of the Emergent Church including the exciting new movement within Friends called 'Convergent Friends'. The rim helps to bring the Covenanting community into the world. Of course, wheels cannot move of their own volition and the Quaker wheel will also be useless without our moving in concert with God and the loving Kingdom.

The Quaker Wheel



While backward motions of the wheel are not necessarily retrogressive, forward movements are not always positive. And yet both proceed initially from a point of stillness. Similarly, our Society needs to stop occasionally (to wait, listen, pray, reflect) to consider its origins, learn from mistakes, hear lessons long lost and, with trust in God, discern Light-filled ways in its journey with the Kingdom. This, of course, is to affirm our true Quaker heritage of peace, justice and mercy. Alan Kolp, the American Friend, has this to say:

Who one is and *what* one thinks and how one does crucially shapes how we process new experience. Hence, studying our tradition is instructive. Indeed, one could argue a clearer, fuller understanding of Fox's spirituality and subsequent development of Quaker spirituality would be a key contributing factor to current Quaker re-vitalisation. In this case, to know where we have been anticipates where we can go.²⁰

Wheels have inner tensions without which they collapse. Each part is equally dependent upon the others and gifts us ultimately with a structure of defined purpose. The inner tensions

of our Quaker ways, too, can be creative in constructing sound Gospel Order, mission and concerns. In fact, I have maintained elsewhere that the development of Quaker Testimony has a threefold dependency on conflict. The early Friends, for instance, confronted the 'Beast' within themselves (convincement) and there was conflict within the movement as well as with a violent and militarised society. These forms of conflict were palpable as the Friends followed the 'narrow path' for unity with God, with one another and between God and humanity.²¹ Modern expressions of Testimony follow a variant of this tripartite phenomenon. In the Asia-West Pacific Section of the FWCC, for instance, Friends find themselves in physically dangerous situations (e.g. as Christians in India). Corporately, they can undergo internal battles when determining their involvement with the wider society in alleviating poverty and fostering peace. And there are tensions between varying traditions of Friends as well as external conflict affecting Friends as a result of physical and structural violence (e.g. the incarceration of anti-conscription Australian Friends and, in South Korea., the jailing of activist Ham Sok-hon). In South Africa between 1952 and the late 1980s, Friends underwent a torturous journey from compliance with institutionalised racism to outright opposition to the Apartheid régime. Internal spiritual gymnastics, inter-movement disputes and harassment from the various authorities in that country resulted in Quaker Testimony of deep significance in the Kingdom of God.²²

A wheel is normally attached to a container for carrying loads and is therefore in equal partnership with other wheels. Each wheel needs careful attention if the container or vessel is to be secure. Similarly, Testimony will not function if relationships among Friends are unequal or the Divine load watered-down or abandoned. Divinely-inspired opportunities will thus be postponed or tragically lost. And so, too, with our inner life; by doing justice to ourselves and one another in the spirit of *dikaíosynē* (justice-righteousness)—unsurprisingly mentioned five times in the Matthean Sermon on the Mount—we will enable God-inspired peace, unity and flourishing within our Society and outside it. If we speak peace with our lips, so said Francis of Assisi, we should first give witness to it in our hearts. Needless to say, justice must be balanced with mercy.

In various cultures the wheel is regarded as a symbol of wholeness and unity among people and with the Divine. The flag of India, for instance, bears the *dharmachakra* as a symbol of hope and unity for the peoples of the sub-continent. The first Friends had the 'symbol' of the Kingdom of God. And finally, as the wheel turns so, too, our realisation of a continuing revelation of the universal Christ/Spirit. The spiritual wheel, therefore, is in perpetual motion as it moves, like the Kingdom of God, from everlasting to everlasting.²³ Moving towards the loving Kingdom, dwelling in the Kingdom, enriching our experience of the Kingdom and spreading the Kingdom, these were always the future of Friends.

Highlighting the Kingdom/Presence of Love within our Society today will help us grasp the underpinnings of our spiritual insights, leadings and concerns besides helping us forge a common religious language and a focus for worship. A common language of the Spirit does not mean uniformity of thought or conforming to a specific ideology, dogma or creed. Perhaps, then, at a time of wide and possibly harmful theological disunity among Friends, a common language is surely needed. I believe that in the knowledge and practice of the Kingdom of God that very language will be found, a language (and thus practice) that can lead us into qualitative unity, purpose and spiritual (and numerical!) flourishing.

Practising, living, the Kingdom is a vocation, a total commitment, the guiding yet controlling purpose of our lives. Are we willing to accept this for ourselves individually and

corporately? The Presence of Love is also the outcome of a mystical oneness with that which is Divine because as the Presence of Love is perfect so we, too, can be perfect. As we fall into sin (separation from Love), the Light and its sovereignty over us diminishes. At the heart of the constant plea that the Friends' communities pray and be in unity is the fear that the Kingdom can fade and, with it, hope. This is precisely why in epistles to Friends, Fox repeatedly urged purity, that they be 'innocent' as Adam and Eve before the Fall, that, in the words of the Scottish poet, Edwin Muir, they should dwell in 'the green springing corner of young Eden'.²⁴ As a continuum of hope, our own devotion to the Kingdom of God can be a prophetic call to subsequent generations to give birth to an extraordinary work whose conception will be in the matrix of eternity.

This *Tao*, so to speak, with its natural flow and 'rightness', continues as we strive to make the Kingdom of God constantly operative. We do this by co-working with God to deprive destructive aggression of its power, by continuing to confront structural violence which victimises the innocent, and by seeking and following paths that free humans to encounter the 'secret' within themselves and others. But we do so with the experience of the Presence of Love for without it disintegration will occur.

Like the early Quakers, an understanding of the Presence of Love incorporates the acceptance of a holy burden on two counts. Firstly, discerning the mysteries of God in history, that is to say, the way of Truth encountered in revealed faith and continual revelation. And secondly, the application of these mysteries to the world with a view to its ultimate fulfilment in God and of God in humanity.²⁵ Continual revelation is inlaid into our theology and cosmology. Being immersed in the Jesus Way we cannot be anti-tradition, as continual revelation suggests to some. Instead, we can use tradition creatively as the Light-filled source of innovative thought and revolutionary practice. The Light, however, is not 'new' (the same for Truth) since it has existed before Creation. This can give rise to witness or Testimony which is, *as* the Kingdom, to be *lived* in the daily round in the struggle to ever-transform hope into reality. This was one of Jesus' most essential and urgent messages.

The Kingdom, then, is a lived experience and a radical encounter with hope and with our own humanity. It bespeaks still an eschatological continuum entailing a witness to the reality that God is always pregnant with self-disclosure. God needs the children of Light, those 'peculiar people' who marginalise themselves at the spiritual edge (*eschaton*) in every generation, to enact the Kingdom of God. This is what the first Friends did. The result was that their Meetings became 'eschaton communities' with a prophetic message for all people and for all times. And not only for Christians since they wanted to eradicate *any* separation between humanity and God. As a consequence, their most earnest desire was to bring people together as the body of Christ (Love). Arguably, the mission of the Society remains the same. Therefore, a reading of early Quaker tracts not only confirms an urgency in enacting the values of the Presence of Love and a certainty in their faithfulness in this respect, but that the more spiritually sophisticated among them articulated the ancient hope of the Lamb's (the Light's) ultimate victory over evil by means of the authority invested in their 'apostolic' or royal priesthood. The same holds for us today.

The Presence of Love and its Testimony are valid for today because it constitutes a powerful, Life-enhancing vision that is alert to oppression, forced marginalisation and the tragic self-inflicted space that humanity so often imposes between it and God. Early Quaker mysticism, too, has 'great value for the present day', as Canby Jones advises, because not only

is it prophetic but it ‘preserves both the historical relevance and moral power of the Gospel plus the immediate experience of Christ’ in all ages.²⁶

If known and fully appreciated by contemporary Quakers, the high standards set down by their religious forebears will always act as benchmarks for the conduct and aspirations of the Religious Society of Friends, and for opening up further possibilities for its priestly and prophetic witness. As a result, the Quakers’ leadings and concerns will be given a solid and far-sighted theological foundation for the problems and challenges that lie ahead.

The Kingdom and its Testimony was, and is, a *unifying* conversation of humanity with God/Love. It was, and is, of true religion for when religion is not always liberating it becomes an oppressor. The Light of true religion was early Quakerism’s deep heart and as such it will continue to touch the soul of generations—but only if ‘the heart of the original awakening’ is revived and known. If our Society’s outreach and teaching is to be effective, if they are to have meaning for those who are either enquiring about, or wishing to travel with the Quakers, it would be wise for Friends to place the Presence of Love at their deep heart’s core. Importantly, then, without reviving ‘the visible ways’ of primitive Quakerism, today’s Friends can learn from the enormous concentration on the Presence of Love by our religious forebears who it as a theological entity worthy of study.

In sum, I have argued that the root cause of our problems and disunity as a Society lie in our neglect of the Kingdom of God. My experience of travelling extensively among Friends worldwide tells me that a re-discovery of the Kingdom is not only necessary as a unifying factor but is worthy of our spiritual and theological curiosity, and more concretely as a discrete entity even to be taught in our educational institutions and Meetings. Why not bring it directly into the public domain just as the early Quakers spoke at the market cross? In so doing they exercised, an incarnational ecclesiology, a messianic spirituality and an apostolic leadership²⁷; God’s sovereignty was ‘over all’ as they strove to be critical observers of the *status quo*.

If only they knew it, the Presence of Love remains the Quakers’ solid ground, their common language of the Spirit leading into *qualitative* unity, purpose and flourishing both spiritual and numerical.

What the first Friends gave us, what many died for, remains a Kingdom-enhancing yet unfinished pathway into authenticity and peace on the inner level and externally for the whole world. Only such a lived and living experience can command attention and loyalty. Only such a lived and living experience can convince.²⁸ Should this gift from the early Friends be neglected, Quakerism, potentially a refreshing, healing and liberating revolutionary orthopraxis of the endless Presence of Love, will run like sand through our fingers and its special radiance will, like the future, be lost. Do we dare to live adventurously, then, in giving holy witness to the Kingdom of God in the Quaker image?



ENDNOTES

¹ The term 'Kingdom of God' has negative associations for some people today. With this in mind, I interchange it with 'Presence of Love' and, occasionally, 'Rule of Love'. Undeniably, 'Kingdom' contains all the historical resonances and works in all contexts. It is the term everyone understands even if they object to it. 'Kingdom of God' has many alternatives (e. g. God's Reign, God's sovereignty, Christ's Doctrine, New Covenant) but none theologically fits all the contexts in which they are used. While 'Peaceable Kingdom' is another useful alternative—it emphasises peace and modifies the effect of 'Kingdom'—it does not completely fit the bill.

Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of *God*, setting it against the earthly kingdoms and empires of his day. The Roman Empire, for instance, was known as a 'kingdom'. He was saying how much better life would be for ordinary people if God were 'king' and we lived under the rule of God's love instead.

² 'Within' or 'among' is still controversial among theologians, a controversy that also raged in the 17th century. The Quakers were clear that Lk. 17:21 meant both but preferred 'within' (as the pearl was 'within'). The early Quaker Samuel Fisher, a Greek scholar, was aware of the meanings of ἐν ('en' = in) to include 'within', 'among', 'by means of' and 'with'. In this, Fisher and other Quakers anticipated modern biblical exegesis by nearly 250 years. They also understood what later evidence from papyri and elsewhere confirmed, that 'within you' (ἐντός ὑμῶν) also meant 'in your hands' and 'within your power/control', emphasising personal responsibility for one's spiritual welfare and the 'now' factor of the Presence of God by its unveiling within. See also C. Roberts, 'The Kingdom of Heaven', *Harvard Theological Review* 41, 1 (1948), 5-7 and G. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1974), 61-5.

³ F. Enns, 'Breaking the Cycles of Violence', *Ecumenical Review* 53, 2 (2001), 188.

⁴ The Law Codes are found in Ex. 20:22 and 23:33 (Book of the Covenant); Deut. 12-26 (Deuteronomic Code) and in the Holiness Code of Lev. 17-26.

⁵ See M. Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (trans. N. Goldhawk. NY.: Harper & Row, 1961), 55; C. Stettler, 'Purity of Heart in Jesus' Teaching', *Journal of Theological Studies* 55, pt. 2 (2004), 492-95. For early Quaker references to Jer. 31:33-34 see, for instance, W. Dewsbury, *A True Prophecy* (London: Calvert, 1653: D1279), 4 and G. Fox and J. Nayler, *Several Papers* (N.p.: n.p., 1654: F1904), 6.

⁶ F. Howgill, *A Lamentation for the Scattered Tribes* (London: Calvert, 1656: H3170), 6.

⁷ J. Scott, 'The Meaning of Hope', *Friends Quarterly* 32, 8 (2001), 356.

⁸ J. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oats, 1994), 93-5, 161-2; see Eph. 6:12 for 'principalities and powers'.

⁹ I. Penington, *The Consideration of a Position* (1660), title pg. and *passim*; see also *Letters of Isaac Penington* (1859), 7-8, Letters 19, 29. And for 17th century definition of 'bowels', see T. Wilson, *A Complete Christian Dictionary* (London: Cotes, 1655: W2943), 273.

¹⁰ Of 152 works Fox composed in the same period, 'Kingdom of God/Heaven/Christ/of the Messiah' occurs 519 times in 72 works (46% of 152), a figure that rises to 144 (or 93% of 152) when equivalent expressions are included. Fox also used the terms 95 times in 49 of the 225 epistles under his name again during the same period. In total, he used 'Kingdom' and equivalents 614 times in 377 writings, a pattern replicated in the works of the other leading (or Public) Friends.

¹¹ S. Cronk, *Peace Be with You* (Philadelphia, PA.: The Tract Association of America, n.d., 1985?), 19-20.

¹² See also Mt. 11: 25, 19:14 and 23-25, 20: 21-25; Mk. 9:47.

¹³ Howgill, *Some of the Mysteries of God's Kingdom Declared* (London: Simmonds, 1658: H3179), 38-40.

¹⁴ Howgill, *ibid.* See Rm. 14:17-18 and Howgill, *The Invisible Things of God* (London: Simmonds, 1659: H3169), 144.

¹⁵ Howgill, *ibid.*, 147.

¹⁶ Howgill, *A Testimony Concerning . . . Edward Burroughs* (London: Warwick, 1662: T809), 6.

¹⁷ See J. Anderdon, *God's Proclamation* (London: Calvert, 1659: A3081), 5.

¹⁸ Howgill, *The Glory of the True Church*, 3.

¹⁹ Penington, *The Jew Outward*, 13. My emphasis. Interestingly, they were not anti-theology as is often supposed: 'Any teaching or expounding of Scriptures *out of the Life*,' wrote Penington, 'shuts up the Kingdom, for the life is the Kingdom.'

²⁰ A. Kolp, 'The Pre-Pendle Hill Spirituality of George Fox' in M. Birkel and J. Newman (eds.), *The Lamb's War: Quaker Essays to Honour Hugh Barbour* (Richmond, IN.: Earlham College Press, 1992), 240. Kolp's emphases.

²¹ See G. Guiton, *The Growth and Development of Quaker Testimony* (Lewiston, NY.: Mellen, 2005), 58, 102-4, 147, 265 and 13.

²² *ibid.*: see esp. chapter 6.

²³ See Fox, Epistle 184 (1659) in *Works* 7: 173; E. Burrough, *A Declaration to all the World* (London: Simmonds, 1657:B5995), 2, 8.

²⁴ E. Muir, 'Transfiguration' in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 198-200.

²⁵ For 'discerning the mysteries of God in history': Dn. 2:18f; 'its ultimate fulfilment in God and of God in humanity': Lk. 6:20-26; Mt. 5:2-11.

²⁶ T. C. Jones, *George Fox's Teaching on Redemption and Salvation* (Ph.D., Yale, 1955), 272.

²⁷ D. Cronshaw, 'The Shaping of Public Theology in Emerging Churches' (Canberra: Oct., 2008), 2-4 at: <<http://www.csu.edu.au/special/accc/worddocs/Papers%20&%20Publications/AAMS%20missions%20conference/Cronshaw.pdf>>.

²⁸ See J. Comblin, *The Holy Spirit and Liberation* (London: Burns and Oates, 1989), 18-19.

