

## The Tyranny of Words

We live in what looks like being a pivotal time for the world, and that in itself would make it a pivotal time for British Friends; but for them, it is also pivotal for other reasons. This essay will suggest some of the directions in which we should go, beginning with a consideration of the implications of the “religious society” we have always claimed to be, first for our Meetings and links with other religious bodies, then for our attitude to sex and marriage, then for the stances we should take on the disfigurements within British society, and then on those in world society, and, briefly, on the kind of circumstances in which it might be right to act illegally. Finally, it reminds us not to let a consideration of these disfigurements blind us to the positives of life, to the multi-faceted splendours open to us, or most of us, to enjoy.

### The Tyranny of Words

For all its emphasis on silence, words play an indispensable part in the worship and business of Friends. How could they not? The role of words in its business meetings, though, called “meetings for worship for business”, differ markedly from its other meetings for worship, which we should perhaps call “meetings for worship for worship”, since they lack any other distinguishing term. In business meetings, words are likely to be specific, as they consider specific proposals, for instance to appoint someone to some office, to give money to some charitable body or to support some specific action. In worship, the words used often include several that are vague and abstract, sometimes to the point of defying definition. Yet how can there be communication between one person and another if what the two of them understand by one of the words they use differs fundamentally?

One of the great strengths of Friends in Britain (and in those meetings in other countries that are run

along the same lines) is that their religious beliefs are not imposed by supposed spiritual leaders, or supposedly divine texts. They may, in their worship, provide for regular readings from the Advices and Queries, but they generally avoid the formal prayers, hymns or readings from the Bible that characterize the worship of other more explicitly Christian bodies. Words spoken in the course of Quaker worship come from Friends' "hearts and minds", and they are asked to come to meeting with those organs duly prepared for their role, as those embarking on a walk along the Pennine Way might be asked to wear walking boots. Such "preparation" is radically different from preparation for a talk, for which the speaker decides and organizes in advance, if not actually writes out, what he or she will say. Preparation for meeting for worship is preparation for listening, and, whether or not there has been vocal ministry, for sensing the way the meeting is going, and for seeing our own concerns, and those of the meeting, in perspective. Worship does not consist of repeating what our predecessors may have said or done, though quotations from the Bible and elsewhere may, on occasion, be used to reinforce the thoughts at which Friends have arrived, now, in the setting in which they are now worshipping. This practice gives Friends a better chance than most of liberating themselves from the tyranny of words.

No word tyrannizes the religious more unmercifully than "God". Some – not many Friends, I imagine – see God as an all-powerful being who, when we die, will punish us for our sins. Hence those who recently put adverts in buses proclaiming that "there probably isn't a God" (the "probably" being a concession insisted on by some alarmed authority) could plausibly be seen as the contemporary equivalent of the Nativity angels' "Fear Not!". Others think of God as a being with a will of its/his/her own, not all-powerful but encouraging and guiding us towards finding the way we can best live. Quakers call this "the Inward Light", or "the Spirit". Some identify it with "the light of Christ", but they see it as accessible to all, needing no priestly intermediary or profession of belief or act of "communion". In Quaker worship there is no requirement that words like Christ or God should be used. Any Quakers who believe that Christ was THE son of God

would find themselves at variance with the generally-held view that we are ALL “children of God” and that there is therefore “that of God” in all of us. ...

Some Quakers, calling themselves “non-theists”, do not believe that any such divine being exists independently of us. They see each society developing its own concept of God as an expression of its own culture. They might still see worship as a mode of coming to see things in perspective, of reflecting on what we know of the totality of things, on what we are and what each of us might become, a process of coming to see our own aims and desires as things we would want to reconcile with the aims and desires of others, and thus, in principle, part of a potential collective aim within which we could all co-exist peacefully and creatively, what the philosopher H J Paton called “the coherent will”.

Thus the differences between “theist” and “non-theist” Friends need not mean that they differ greatly in respect of why they come to Meeting or what they hope to gain from it. Nor need it mean that there is a fundamental difference between their views and those of agnostics and atheists. Let us imagine an atheist who has considered their life as a whole and wants it to promote and contribute to a world in which everyone, including, but extending beyond, one's family and neighbours, to be able to live happily, healthily and creatively, and has also recognized that, to achieve those ends, insofar as it lay within their power, and to be the person they wanted to be, was much dependent on their mood, or “spirit”, which in turn is affected by quiet reflection on the world and on their own “condition”, in association with those of similar mind. Would this differ, essentially, from what we know as “worship”? True, the spiritual experiences theist Friends attest to may be, for them, deeper and more overwhelming, but are they essentially different from what we mean by the etymologically related notion of “inspiration”? Like mountains, or music, the silence of a Friends meeting may “inspire” us to see possibilities in our lives, our careers, our habits, our relations with others, and our creative potential, which might not otherwise have occurred to us. Is

this not something which atheists and agnostics might well also seek to achieve. Why should we not, if we wish, all do this together?

A far more fundamental difference of belief is that between those who believe, not only that there is a God, but that it is only through Christ that we are able to communicate with that God, and those who believe that there are many ways to attain the perspective, and consequent wisdom, that religion can bring. For the former, access to God requires use of something like a password, that is, the performance of words or physical actions, and, for many Christians, the invocation of a the name of Jesus Christ, whom they see as **the** son of God. His uniqueness, in their view, is demonstrated by his claimed descent from David, King of the Jews, his supposed virgin birth, the many miracles he is believed to have performed, and the claims as to his resurrection. "No man cometh to the Father but by me." If you believe this, all who claim to have found other ways to God must be in error, regardless of the kind of lives they live. Friends say "Let your lives speak!". Christ's life would speak more, rather than less, eloquently to us if it were stripped of its supernatural and genealogical attachments. What we know of it portrays someone dedicated to teaching his fellow human beings what he saw as the way to live, and who continued to say what he believed to be right even in the knowledge that in so doing, he would probably suffer the excruciatingly painful Roman penalty of crucifixion. Our overwhelming admiration for such courage and endurance is not dependant on the miracles with which he is associated or on his claimed uniqueness. Nor do we need to agree uncritically with everything he is reported to have said. Even more importantly, we are not precluded from recognizing other equally impressive people who, like Christ, can serve as examples of what heights human beings are capable of reaching. In the twentieth century, Gandhi and Mandela immediately come to mind.

Often, we find professedly Christian bodies, like America's Southern Baptists, or Ireland's Catholic church in the 1930s, as portrayed by Sebastian Barry in his novel "The Secret Scripture", acting in

total opposition to Quaker ideas and values. Even among those calling themselves Quakers, there are those who have quite differently organized Meetings for Worship, and others confidently declare that homosexuality is contrary to the will of God. Why, then, do we pray specifically for Christian unity, or even for the unity of those who share our name? No Quaker, I am sure, would want to see a repeat of the religious wars that accompanied the so-called Reformation, but there is no logical reason why Friends should welcome unity with those whose beliefs imply that the rest of the world is wrong. That is not to say that we should not rejoice when any other body, whether professedly Christian or not, shares our specific concerns. For instance, Catholics have been prominent among those who in recent years have campaigned for the more humane treatment of asylum seekers, and we should work with them, and with everyone else, Christian or not, who supports such campaigns. But our membership of bodies such as Christians Together implies a unity of underlying belief that does not exist, and integrity demands that we should disengage from them.

For similar reasons, clarity of communication among Friends would be enhanced if we could learn not to use the word "God" in our Meetings. It means so many things to different people that we can never be sure what it means in any given use, unless the speaker has taken great care to explain what it means in the use in question and conveyed that meaning to the listener. There are Friends (and attenders!) who when they hear the word switch off, thinking "Now I've lost it." It is always possible to convey the meaning a word has in a given context by explanations couched in other words, which are not mere synonyms, and the word "God" is no exception, though some of its nuances may be lost,

It might be also be argued that the word "worship" is equally difficult for those who do not believe in a divine being external to ourselves. Whom, or what, are we worshipping in our "meetings for worship"? This awkward question can perhaps be side-stepped by treating the phrase as a technical term. Friends told that there will be a "meeting for worship" ("worship worship") at a certain time

know that a relatively large number of their fellows, and perhaps some attenders and visitors, will gather at (or about!) that time in a silence, which may or may not be broken by one or more spoken “ministries”. Told there will be a “meeting for worship for business” they will expect it to begin and end in a similar silence, with a pre-planned, but not rigid, programme of items in between for discussion discussion and, if possible, decision, guided by the meeting's clerk. Thus the phrase is useful even for those who do not know what the “worship” part of it means, or do not accept its implications, rather, but not exactly, in the same way that the phrase “Meeting for Sufferings” is useful once we know how such meetings fit into our Quaker decision-making structure, even for those who do not know how it came to get its name, or what relevance that name may have for its activities to-day.

If Friends rigorously avoided the use of such words as “God” and “worship”, and ceased to identify themselves as Christian or as part of “Churches Together” and the like, could the body to which they belonged reasonably call itself a “Religious Society”? It could indeed, and with as much, if not more, reason than it does now, since it would remain a collection of people who sought to live lives that made sense “in the eye of eternity”, and to recognize in others the potential to do likewise. “Let your lives speak” has long been a favourite, and central, Quaker injunction. What we do matters more than the words we use, and even if we were to drop words and affiliations that as Friends we have long held dear, because, on reflection, they no long seemed right to us, we would still find an extraordinary inheritance of wisdom in the principles and practices we have come to adopt over the last three and a half centuries, including:

- 1) The refusal to appoint Quaker clergy to be distinguished from the rest of our membership
- 2) The acceptance of men and women as equals, and particularly as equally capable of “ministering” to us, that is, of inspiring us, by their words and actions, as to the directions our lives might fruitfully take. These two features of Quakerism have disposed, at a stroke,

of the bitter debates of other religious bodies over whether women can properly be made priests or bishops.

- 3) Not voting. The refusal of Quakers to take votes at their business meetings and wait until “the feeling of the meeting” emerges is a reminder of the truth that a belief or an opinion is not necessarily wrong because those who hold it are in the minority.
- 4) The refusal to take oaths, because these imply a double standard of truthfulness.
- 5) The recognition that even those who commit the worst crimes are human beings, and have some potential for good in them.
- 6) Opposition to discrimination against anyone arising out of their race, or the ethnic group to which they belong.
- 7) Opposition to the death penalty and to all other forms of corporal punishment.
- 8) Recognizing the devastating effects of extreme poverty, and of major inequalities of income, and seeking both to mitigate them, and to abolish their causes.
- 9) Seeking to understand, heal and resolve conflicts, or at least to limit the intensity of the ill-feeling, and the severity of the damage and the loss of life, that can result from them.
- 10) Opposition to torture.
- 11) Opposition to all sports that inflict pain on animals or human beings.
- 12) Opposition to any discrimination against, or punishment of, gays and lesbians.
- 13) Openness to new theories and ideas and a willingness to examine the evidence and arguments for them.

Many of these principles and practices went against the opinions prevailing in society at the time they were adopted. Most have now been generally accepted in this country. All have contributed to action, and potential for action, that have enabled Friends to look eternity in the eye.

## Sex and Marriage

The fact that, in our society, contraception is available easily and without embarrassment, has meant that it is now open to any two people to have sex without running any risk of unwanted pregnancy or, if condoms are used, of the transmission of sexual infections, including AIDS. That fact, combined with the Quaker belief of “that of God in everyone” (or, in less theistic terms, the right of everyone to shape their own lives the way they want to, provided that it does not hurt others) has led Friends to be much more accepting of what, until quite recently, was seen as unconventional sexual behaviour. The commitment Friends made this year to creating a same-sex form of marriage on a par with heterosexual marriage takes them a long way towards the complete acceptance of the principle that, between consenting adults, who we have sex with is a matter of choice.

The phrase “consenting adults” raises two important questions: at what age we become adults, in the sense of it being legal for someone to have sex with us, if we agree? And are there situations, or relationships, in which one party exercises such power that the consent of the other party is unreal?

In this country the legal “age of consent” and the minimum age of marriage are the same, sixteen. It is harsh to brand all sexual acts in which one or both parties is only fifteen as illegal. Friends might well consider, therefore whether they should campaign for a lower age of consent, and what that age should be.

We should hesitate, though, to extend the meaning of “consent”. We would all agree that it is always wrong to ignore, or override, whether by force, or by threats, someone's refusal to have sex, but though sexual relationships where one party almost necessarily has more power than the other: teacher and pupil (or student); doctor and patient; therapist and client may generally be inadvisable, on the grounds that the weaker party does not seem in a position to refuse, and so, in agreeing to



sex, is not “really” consenting. ~~Some would say that in such relationships the weaker party is not in a position to refuse, and therefore not in a position to consent,~~ and though there are certainly cases in which such relationships have proved disastrous for such a party; ~~but~~ there are, equally certainly, others for whom it has been rewarding or liberating.

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Men and women now meet, at work and elsewhere, more often and more easily than ever before. Those committed to a long-term relationship in, or outside, marriage are more likely than ever to find themselves, at some point, attracted to someone other than their partner. If this attraction leads to sex, the emotional pain of their spouse or partner can be overwhelming, leading to bitterness and even violence. Expectations, for whatever reason, that their relationship was going to be lasting and monogamous will have played a big part in causing this pain. Logically, there are two ways of avoiding a relationship having such traumatic results: resisting temptation, or reducing expectations. In “Open Fidelity”, Anna Sharman argues in favour of the parties to a relationship agreeing, from the beginning, that each of them shall be free to take other partners. When either or both develops other relationships, that does not, she argues, mean a weakening of their bond; it means only that they need to negotiate an acceptable distribution of their time to allow them the privacy they need with each.

“Open Fidelity” may or not “work”, in the sense of protecting the parties from the traumatic effects of jealousy, in any given case, though she seems to find that, in some cases, at least, “a partner can feel joy at seeing their partner loving someone else”, and that when such partnerships do end, they do so on more amiable terms than those in more monogamous ones; but there are no good reasons for regarding this as a kind of relationship inferior to one of life-long monogamy. Even advocates of the latter do not now regard people as morally bound to live their whole life with the first partner they had sex with. Yet Quaker weddings require each party to say

“Friends, I take this my friend ..... to be my wife/husband, promising, through divine

assistance, to be unto him/her a loving and faithful wife/husband, so long as we both on earth shall live.” (They may substitute allowed alternative phrases to those included here, but the substitutes are essentially synonymous with what they replace.)

In all other meetings for worship, any words that are spoken are not prescribed. They come from the heart – or the “Spirit”. In Quaker marriages, there is scope neither for differences in substance, nor even variations in wording, other than those specifically allowed. They thus come down unequivocally on the side of permanence and fidelity, thus implicitly according such marriages a higher status than the “Open Fidelity” relationships Anna Shearmen advocates.

Additionally, these specified words must be spoken “in an audible and solemn manner”. “Audibly”, yes, but why “solemnly”? Presumably, if it was thought that either, or both, parties had spoken then frivolously or hilariously, the marriage would be invalid, though Quaker Faith and Practice does not indicate how a decision to invalidate it would be arrived at. Or perhaps “solemn” is no more than a pious injunction, inserted to further the claim that Quaker marriages are no less serious events than marriages “solemnized” in other places of worship, where marriage is regarded as a sacrament. Friends, rightly, do not believe in sacraments. The promises that constitute a Quaker wedding are promises which, as with all other promises, those making them have a prima facie duty to fulfil, but the addition of “with divine assistance” (or its equivalent) makes them come to resemble the oaths that Quakers refuse to take. It is as if with promises, in contrast with the taking of oaths, Quakers do admit a double standard.

Many Quakers, married in a Friends Meeting, break the promises they make there, as do many others married elsewhere. Rightly, Friends are understanding with those marriages that break down, and are usually ready to allow them to re-marry in a Friends Meeting, making, of course, similar promises of lifelong love and fidelity to their new partners. But clearly, like all religious marriage

ceremonies, Quaker weddings reinforce the expectations that such promises, or “vows”, will be fulfilled, and thereby render the emotional consequences of any breach of them more harrowing. Why, as Quakers, do we prefer the sexual relationships of our members, whether of the same-sex or of the opposite sex, to be life-long and monogamous? Why not abolish Quaker weddings and welcome all couples, and individuals, on an equal basis? Those who wish to give their relationship legal status can do so at a Registry Office.

If, as Friends, we were to complete the process of dismantling all the rules restricting, or morally ranking, the circumstances in which, and between whom, sex between consenting adults is legitimate, we should have to consider prostitution. It goes without saying that nobody should be compelled into prostitution by force or economic need, but women – and men – attractive enough to be in demand should have the option of selling the right to have sex with them. In some cases, this might amount to performing a social or psychiatric service. Some of their partners might otherwise find no one to have sex with.

Central to all human relationships, whether sexual or not, is the need for love – another word that tyrannizes us by its capacity to mean so many things, and defy definition. To “answer that of God” in those we encounter we need to see each of them as a person, and to be sensitive to and respectful of their unique personalities, hopes and tastes, as well as aware of the complications of our own feelings about them. We also need to be as aware as we can be of the effects on them of what we do and say. It is a lot to ask of us, and possibly a more difficult demand in sexual relationships, where the pleasure of success and the heartbreak of disappointment can be so much more intense than in other relationships.

In all Meetings, there are likely to be those who need advice and counselling, and it should always be clear to every Friend (and regular attender!) where they can go to get it, either from another

member of the Meeting or from some professional in whose sympathy and ability to help they can be confident.

### Friends in the World

#### Concerns about UK society

Anyone dedicated to promoting, and preserving, a world which sustains and cares for everyone in it soon encounters huge disfigurements, nationally and globally, as Friends are well aware.

There have, however, been some impressive recent attempts to chart some of the most glaring of them, and suggest remedies. A study by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level*, published this year – and cited three times by writers and others asked to name their book, or books, of the year in the Observer this month – concentrated on the world's more affluent countries, in terms of national income per head, and began by measuring the degree of inequality of income within each. It was able to show that, in general, the countries in which such inequality of income was the highest had the lowest life expectancy and the highest rate of infant mortality, and, in proportion to population, the most homicides, the most mental illness, the most educational drop-outs, the most people in prison, the most obesity, the most teenage births, the least social mobility, and the least trust. A similar comparison was made of the fifty constituent states of the USA, with very similar results. Moreover, among the “affluent” countries, the UK had one of the greatest inequalities of income.

No one reading *The Spirit Level* with any care could deny that inequality is a primary cause of some of the most serious problems in “developed societies”, and that, in the countries – and those American states – where such inequalities were most extreme, government action to counteract them, by reducing the incidence of the problems they tend to produce, would be likely to benefit the

richer as well as the poorer strata of the population.

This will not come as a surprise to most Friends, but until recently the motive behind Quaker concern for such inequalities has been compassion for their victims, and they have had to look, for support in their efforts, to those who share their compassion. This is a moment to be seized. The solidity of recent research has now armed them with arguments that would appeal, unassailably, to the self-interest of the better-off. Redistribution of income can now be shown to be likely to reduce the incidence of many of the features of society that make it, for them especially, an uncomfortable place in which to live, a truth which has now been recognized even by the Conservative leader, David Cameron. In other words, it will pay the rich, collectively, to accept higher taxes on income and capital that will be conducive to approaching the realization, in terms of income, of that equality whose rightness runs deep in Quaker tradition.

In this country, inequality is not confined to income. We are a class-ridden society. The hierarchy of titles, culminating in the ultimate expression of social inequality, the monarchy, is an additional contradiction to the Quaker tradition of equality, a further obstacle to the realization of a society in which we are all equal citizens, in which anyone can be friends with anyone else.

It cannot be denied that the House of Lords has, not infrequently, thwarted determined attempts by Governments to push through inhuman and potentially oppressive legislation, or that it has ventilated complaints, notably about the treatment of asylum seekers in all its aspects, which might otherwise have escaped notice (though the Commons, through some of its back-benchers, has not been by any means supine in this area of policy.) Nor, after thirty years in which there has always been one party (the Conservatives to 1997, Labour thereafter) which has enjoyed at least adequate, and usually overwhelming, majorities in the House of Commons, should the desirability of a second legislative chamber be disputed. It serves a similar purpose, though less securely, to the

Quaker practice of waiting for the feeling of the meeting to emerge; that is, it serves as a brake on majorities intent on over-riding minorities. But membership of that body should be wholly divorced from that weird and indefensible system of hereditary titles, through which, until relatively recently, the House of Lords was largely constituted.

To emphasize the desirability of British Friends concentrating on launching a campaign for the reduction of economic inequality in this country is not to ignore or disparage the many projects, launched or supported by Friends, designed to improve the lives of people who, for whatever reason, find themselves in situations of disadvantage, such as those with learning disabilities, those who are mentally ill, those in prison, and asylum seekers. These projects typically involve direct contact with the people they are designed to help, and often generate innovative ways of addressing the situations with which they deal.

One area of policy that cries out for reform, on both compassionate and practical grounds is the UK's treatment of crime. Prisons have never been fuller, yet the high rate of re-offending shows that they do not work. Friends have been active in seeking to apply the Quaker ideal of "answering that of God in everyone" in this difficult field. They have volunteered to be prison visitors, giving prisoners a sense that there is someone, at least, who is interested in them for what they are; they have supported schemes for sustained, and highly demanding psychotherapy, for long-term prisoners who deliberately choose it, at Grendon Underwood, and have promoted the introduction of options of restitutive justice, that is allowing offender and victim, in a safe environment to meet and learn. This concept gained international endorsement at the UN Congresses on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice at Vienna in 2000 and Bangkok in 2005.

More recently, the development of "circles of support" for child sex offenders is a particularly brave initiative, given the detestation in which those found to have sex with young children, are often

held. In such “circles of support” the offender, having pledged never to repeat the offence, meets regularly with a mixed group and is encouraged to feel accepted as a human being, and helped to develop other interests and other means of sexual satisfaction. It can no longer be claimed that none of those so supported ever again offends, but re-offending is, as one might expect, much lower for them than for others who have received no such support. Because of this, the work of these “circles” has been able to win some financial support from the Police and the Home Office. The success of these approaches to criminal behaviour, and of such work as that done by Quaker Social Action, augurs well for the future of British Friends.

In such cases, British Friends have often acted as pioneers in ideas which are later given much wider, and in some cases official recognition and support. There will be many other opportunities for them to do this in other spheres of social life.

Another field in which there has been, in the last few years, increased Quaker involvement is that of asylum seekers. As a party to the near-universally ratified UN Refugees Convention, the UK committed itself to offer asylum to all with “a well-founded fear of persecution”, but in spite of occasional humane and sympathetic decisions, it has at times allowed many of them to be treated unbelievably harshly. After an initial decision by the Home Office Border Agency, those rejected have the right of appeal to the Appellate Tribunal, for which they often find it difficult to get adequate legal support. When such appeals fail, it is clear to those who know them that many are terrified of being returned to the country from which they have come, and do have a well-founded fear of persecution, but what often happens is that the stories they tell in support of their applications cannot be proved, and are disbelieved. Others, with reason, fear, not their governments, but members of their families, ethnic groups, or cults, who may have threatened them with violence or even death, threats from which their governments may be incapable of giving them adequate protection. Such fears are usually not seen here as warranting asylum.

In the time they spend waiting for a decision, or appealing against it, many suffer great deprivation. They are not allowed to take jobs, but are provided with somewhere to live and a subsistence allowance, recently reduced from £42 to £35 a week, which has to cover travel, to see lawyers or doctors, and to comply with a new additional obligation to report to Liverpool in the period when their cases are being considered. If rejected, whole families, which can include small children, may be held in detention centres until arrangements are made for forcibly returning them. Sometimes, the Government concedes that the situation in the country they have left is so unstable that they cannot, at the moment, be returned, so they are held in this prison-like environment for some time. The job of collecting those whom the Government deems **can** be returned, either from the homes they have made here, or from the detention centres into which they have been decanted, is contracted to private companies. Many rejected asylum seekers complain of physically violent treatment and racial abuse at the hands of such companies' staff. A dossier of 300 such complaints, submitted to the UK Border Agency in the middle of last year, is still being investigated. Not surprisingly, many applicants, to avoid such a fate, "disappear" when their appeals fail, even though this may mean they have no money with which to buy food and nowhere to sleep except in a telephone box or an abandoned car.

There is thus plenty of scope for Quaker compassion and practical support, made available as needed, without asking questions of the recipients. In the last two years, the formation of QRAG (Quaker Refugee and Asylum Group) has led to the formulation and adoption by Friends of statements calling for more compassionate treatment of people whose situation may be desperate. This is a problem that is likely to be with us for many more years, unless the Government is persuaded to change some of its policies. The fact that the Independent Asylum Commission, a body of some weight, which investigated the whole area of policy thoroughly and produced three reports last year calling for a juster system, is now in dialogue with the Border Agency, is a hopeful



sign, but one obstacle to improvement is the generally-held view that public opinion is hostile to asylum seekers, a view that seems common among politicians, civil servants, and even those Friends who are most active in their support.

Friends have a duty to join in educating the public on this subject. If they did they would find support among Catholics and other Christian churches, as well as among many professing no religion. As with all campaigns, it makes sense to find as many allies as possible, as long as no underlying principle is compromised. One place which, with Quaker help, has set an impressive example, is Sheffield, which has declared itself a City of Sanctuary, undertaking to welcome immigrants from all countries and protect them from discrimination. British society to-day has many disfigurements, but Friends should not assume that it is dead to compassion either for asylum seekers, or for others who need it.

Quite apart from the treatment of asylum seekers, discussed earlier, Friends have also been prominent in recent cases of alleged violations of such rights in Britain, such as the Police's use of violence against peaceful protesters, and the handing over of British nationals suspected of terrorism to be tortured by Pakistan. It is clear that neither the UK Human Rights Act, nor the European Convention, has by itself sufficed to prevent such stark violations. For the moment, certainly, British Friends will need to remain alert to developments that threaten rights we have almost come to take for granted.

### The Disfigurements of Global Society

It is now some decades since Barbara Ward wrote "The Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet", a book whose very title challenged us to look differently at the Earth, to imagine it as if it were one of many habitable units of the universe, which one god might give to another as a present,

but which, once given, required looking after with some skill and affection, like a puppy or a kitten given to a child at Christmas. Lacking such care, it might shrivel and die. This might sadden the recipient god, but, remorseful though he might be, and resolved to do better with the next one, he would have plenty of “next ones” to choose a successor from. For us, though, it would constitute the annihilation of everything we know and value, amounting to the extinction of life here. At the time, this way of looking at our planet was startlingly fresh. To-day, few of us can be unaware of its vulnerability.

Environmental threats are likely to figure prominently among the concerns of Friends for a long time. Assertions about the extent of this environmental threat, of the devastation it could impose on our collective and individual lives, and the feasible modes of counteracting it, are likely to be highly controversial, and will depend on the often far from unequivocal conclusions of scientific research. Friends have a duty to promote such research, first by lobbying for the allocation of resources to educate enough potential scientists and enable them to do it, and then to scrutinize the conclusions they reach, and particularly those of the IPCC (the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change), with scrupulous care and emotional detachment, and finally to advocate, and exemplify as far as possible in their own lives, the responses the results of their scrutiny dictate.

#### Global Disfigurations: Violations of Human Rights

Of course, such environmental deterioration as we may thus discover is not the only massive disfiguration of this “small” planet. Few, if any, human beings are immune from the disposition, at times, to frustrate, hurt, damage or destroy other human beings, though there are parts of the world in which the consequences of such a disposition are now generally controlled within fairly strict limits, particularly in the continent which, seventy years ago, was the scene of what was probably the most sustained massacre in human history, the Holocaust. That event largely coincided with the second of the century's two world wars, in both of which the country whose government perpetrated

it, Germany, was involved. That Germany now lives at peace with its European neighbours – which does not mean that it has no disputes with any of them – is a basis for hope that large-scale hostility of some human beings towards other human beings is a curable disease. Indeed, the world abounds in acts of inhumanity, ranging from other genocidal massacres to the execution of people whom governments, or their opponents, deem unwanted, or the imprisonment and torture of those thought to have knowledge of crucial facts which they would otherwise never disclose.

~~by making sure we ensure that our central bodies have the resources to support them.~~

One has only to look at one of Amnesty's Country by Country Reports to realise how many of the world's governments, in dealing with those whom they believe, rightly or wrongly, to be their political opponents, continue to deny them the basic protection implicit in the generally lauded "rule of law" and articulated in the covenants and conventions of human rights, such as no (protracted) detention without trial, fair trials with competent legal aid for all defendants, and no extra-judicial executions.

The succession of international human rights treaties that have emerged in the course of the last century has negated the tradition, established by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, that sovereign states, recognizing each other as independent and reasonably civilised entities, could do almost as they pleased with their own inhabitants, provided that, in their international dealings, including the treatment of the nationals of other states, they conformed to the principles of international law. The era of relatively infrequent, and relatively limited, war in Europe between 1648 and 1914, with the gigantic exception of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars between 1789 and 1815, provided some justification for regarding this system as an improvement on the incessant and unrestrained religious wars that preceded it, but after the Nazi Holocaust it was widely recognized, outside the Soviet orbit, that even the most culturally advanced of states could not be left to treat

their subjects as they pleased, and through the more inclusive Council of Europe – **not** the Common Market – the European Convention on Human Rights was adopted. It not only listed the rights of all the member countries' inhabitants, but, once a member had accepted the right of individual petition, as all did in the end, provided a slow but ultimately potent means of challenging any alleged violation of those rights by it. The passing of the UK's Human Rights act, essentially based on the Convention, in 1998, at last allowed questions involving these rights to be considered speedily in UK courts, while preserving the right of appeal against their decisions to the European Court of Human Rights. This has helped many asylum seekers faced with imminent deportation, as courts have been willing to issue injunctions against such removals when the dangers those removed could encounter after removal could be documented.

Friends have worked hard with those seeking to extend to the rest of the world the protection offered by the European Convention. The United Nations has adopted two Covenants of Human Rights, one of “Civil and Political” rights roughly similar to the European Convention. Rachel Brett, a British Friend attached to the Quaker United Nations Office at Geneva has persisted with unwavering patience in pushing for improvements in the international recognition of such rights, particularly the right of conscientious objection to military service, now recognized as an implication of the Covenant's basic rights. In the international context, what we need is more Rachel Bretts.

### Peace

The Peace Testimony is central to Quaker history and is bound to inspire the future concerns of British Friends. The enormous crowds that gathered to express their opposition to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 shows that in its general opposition to war, they have made some converts. Restoring the UK's status as a “Great Power” no longer has much appeal. Friends have, of course, concerned

themselves with wars wherever they have occurred, and in mediation, and in protecting, by their presence those frightened of being attacked by hostile soldiers or police in the course of their necessary and peaceful journeys, as has happened in Palestine, they have been helpful and inventive.

The most important channel by which British Friends can promote peace and other global concerns is probably through the two QUNOs (Quaker Offices at the United Nations) at New York and Geneva, the latter of which is a direct responsibility of QPSW. The excellent July 2007 issue of Friends Quarterly gives many reasons why. As well as ~~given~~<sup>giving</sup> these bodies moral and financial support, we could make more effort to ensure that our Meetings keep up-to-date with their activities, and share our global concerns with them. Other possibly fruitful lines of development would be intensified opposition to the renewal or replacement of Trident, a renewed attempt to negotiate a world wide treaty banning nuclear weapons, and promoting the creation of other Peace Departments in British universities following the success of Bradford.

### Creative Lawbreaking

A recent booklet, gently satirizing Friends, called "The Quakers of Ruritania", relates the story of a Friend, having to serve a prison sentence as a result of her beliefs, using her time inside to give her fellow-prisoners a course in "Creative Lawbreaking" That sounds just right for Quakers, though one wonders whether it would have been tolerated by the prison authorities. From the inception of the Society, Friends have accepted that their principles, derived from the contemplation of the kind of life that they are called upon to live, or some might now put it, from what makes sense "in the eye of eternity", may on occasion bring them into conflict with the law. Indeed Friends were originally legally forbidden to hold their Meetings in public. When imprisoned for doing that, their children met publicly in their place.

Keir Hardie was not a Friend, but most Friends would surely agree with his assertion that “Conscription is the badge of the slave”. In both world wars, and in the period after 1945 in which conscription was continued, Friends both opposed it and supported those who refused to be conscripted, and even after it ended in the UK, have, ~~as with the case of South Korea mentioned earlier,~~ sought to have a right of conscientious objection universally recognized. Those who claim that the payment of income tax in full to a Government that wrongfully prepares for war is also a violation of their human rights are less convincing, as the analogy is not plausible. Those forced to serve for two years or whatever the term is in the armed forces, are indeed enslaved. Throughout that period, they have to obey the orders of their superiors, however much they might disapprove of them. Those who are merely asked to pay their taxes do not have to do anything, and unlike the tithes to which early Quakers objected, which contributed to the support of the Church of England, the income tax we pay goes into a common pool, in which that used for military purposes cannot be distinguished from any other Government expenditure, much of which they might well want to support. Moreover, objecting to income-tax creates a precedent. If all taxpayers were entitled to withhold tax for any project they deemed wrong, the Governments spending would be determined by the richer taxpayers, as they would have more tax to withhold and thereby exercise that much greater influence on decisions.

Much more justifiable are those acts of interference with arms installations, such as those at Menwith Hill and Faslane. and can contribute to the general unpopularity of such installations.

On the other hand, lawbreaking, however open and principled, does have the disadvantage that when, as not infrequently happens, the Government does something illegal, while one can certainly oppose it, and use its illegality as a reason for opposing, one cannot consistently claim its illegality alone **necessarily** makes it wrong.

## Eliminating extreme poverty

I have left to the end what might be considered the world's greatest disfigurement, and attempts, which might come to be seen as one of the world's most magnificent successes, to contain it. There are now 1.4 billion – fourteen hundred million - people in the world living in "extreme" poverty, which the World Bank defines as "not having enough income to meet the most basic human needs for adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, sanitation, health care and education (Singer, p6). As a result, in 2007, according to UNICEF, nearly ten million children under five died, about 27,000 a day, and it is thought that a further eight million older children and adults also died from such causes prematurely in that year.

Overwhelming though these figures seem, they constitute a quite dramatic reduction in such infant deaths. UNICEF estimates that in 1960 extreme poverty accounted for twenty million deaths of children under five, out of a world population less than half its 2007 size; proportionately it declined from about 10,000 in every million to 2,000 in every million, a fall of about 80%. The incidence of extreme poverty as the World Bank defines it has also declined sharply; the figure of 1.4 billion (1,400,000,000) is 25% lower than the corresponding figure for 1981. These are huge successes, yet little has been heard about them.

In 2000, the United Nations unanimously adopted a set of eight "Millennium Development Goals", deemed achievable by 2015:

1. Reducing by half the proportion of the world's population living in extreme poverty
2. Reducing by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger
3. Ensuring that children everywhere are able to take a full course of primary schooling
4. Ending sex disparity in education

5. Reducing by two-thirds the mortality rate among children under five
6. Reducing by three-quarters the rate of maternal mortality
7. Halting and beginning to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and halting and beginning to reduce the incidence of malaria and other major diseases
8. Reducing by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water.

It was estimated that the cost of achieving these goals would amount to \$121 billion in 2006, rising to \$189 billion in 2015. Taking account of promises of official development aid from governments, to achieve these goals a further \$48 billion would be needed in 2006, and a further \$74 billion in 2015.

Peter Singer, whose "The Life You Can Save" came out earlier this year, calculated that there are about 855 million "affluent" people in the world, defining affluence as "having an income above the average income of Portugal, the poorest of the "rich club" of countries. He shows that if all of them were to give \$200 a head, the entire cost of achieving these goals would be met, including that part pledged by governments, and goes on to argue that it would be possible to extend these goals to the point where "extreme poverty" could be effectively abolished. Of course it would be fairer, he concedes, if each person's contribution were to be set by a formula related progressively to income, with those not paying income-tax paying nothing, the 90 per cent of taxpayers with the lowest income giving 1 per cent, while, for instance, the 14,000 Americans each having incomes of over \$10.7 million a year give a third of that part of their income that exceeds that figure. No one who gave on this scale, Singer contends, could be said to suffer significant hardship as a result, except possibly those at the very bottom of the income tax range, and he makes clear that he would not ask such giving from anyone for whom it meant a serious sacrifice,

Meeting the Millennium Development Goals, according to the UN Task Force that has calculated



their costs, would mean that, compared with the “business as usual” scenario, 500 million fewer people would live in extreme poverty, 300 million would no longer suffer from hunger, 350 million more would have access to safe drinking water, and 650 million more would have safe sanitation. Singer reckons it would be possible to go further, and abolish extreme poverty, with its attendant infant mortality and maternal mortality, altogether, and also to cure such devastating, though not actually life-threatening, conditions as river blindness and obstetric fistula.

Before they gave on this scale, potential donors would want to be sure that the agencies to which they gave were getting results. Singer shows that there are many who can claim spectacular success. The World Health Organization, for instance, eliminated smallpox, which in 1967 had been killing two million people a year, over a period of twelve years from 1967 to 1979. Its current attempts to reduce deaths from malaria, diarrhoea, respiratory infections and measles are thought to cost \$300 per life saved, according to an economist who is generally skeptical about the value of inter-governmental aid to Africa, William Easterly. Singer cites many other agencies who get results, in terms of saving lives, correcting deformities or repairing crushingly damaging conditions arising from accidents. He also notes, with some enthusiasm, recent trends towards subjecting charities to tests of their effectiveness on an analogy with WHICH?, by such bodies as GiveWell in the USA and New Philanthropy Capital in the UK.

This surely is something to which British Friends, if they threw their weight behind it, could make a big difference, not just by being generous with their own money, but forming alliances with donors with the same aims, and attempting to create a “culture of giving”, as well as campaigning vociferously for generosity on the part of governments. Singer shows that there are several examples of groups of very rich, or even only “better-off” people in Australia and America, committed to mutual encouragement in giving a substantial share of their incomes for such ends. The outstanding example is Bill Gates, who has given \$28.7 billion to found a charity dedicated to

this purpose. Developing such a “culture” would be a sphere in which Quakers could be wholehearted evangelicals!

Though Friends tend to prefer charitable projects where they encounter the beneficiaries as individuals, they have also demonstrated a willingness to support larger-scale ventures. Leslie Kirkley, an early Director of Oxfam, was a Quaker, and in 2000 Jenny Levine, with the help of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, produced a study pack called “Is Your Money Working For the World?”, in which a contributor, Judy Weleminsky described the operation of a “giving circle” which might, with appropriate variations, serve as a model. Perhaps those who give to such causes need to stop being bashful about their giving.

#### Positives

In reminding ourselves of some of the disfigurements of our own society and of the global society within which it exists, and suggesting ways in which, as Friends, we could and should help with their amelioration, we should not forget the astonishing abundance of joys which life has to offer most of us, most of the time. Landscapes, art, theatre, music in all its forms, literature and poetry, travel, sex and family life, humour, games and sports are only some of the pleasures that are there to be enjoyed. It is only when they damage others, or preclude us from responding as fully as we otherwise might to the world's needs, that we may need to deny ourselves such pleasures, not necessarily absolutely, but in specific cases and contexts. Each of us needs to remember that when we say there is “that of God” in each of us, that is another way of saying that we have in us a creative spark that makes each of us unique and irreplaceable.

