

# Thoughts on the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain

## Looking backwards and looking forwards

### 1 Historical Background to the Quaker Way

**1.1** Quaker beginnings in the 1650s were both straightforward and exciting. There was a widespread disenchantment with established religion to the extent that people we now group as Seekers were meeting separately from the established churches. Prescribed religion was no longer unquestioningly accepted. Civil war had deposed the king, and censorship and religious festivals had been abolished. There was an enormous ferment of free thinking, and the social and political control previously exercised through the King's Council and the established church had been largely thrown off. The bible was everybody's book and illiteracy was no barrier as you just joined in the discussion that went on everywhere. For many the millennium was about to dawn. People gathered in stillness in town houses and farm houses to seek new paths or to wait in expectation of the Christ's second coming.

**1.2** In this atmosphere the young George Fox, in his twenties, was studying his bible and trying to make sense of its message. He gave up on the institutional church and its ministers and he sought the house groups. His spiritual struggle for understanding came to its climax as he realised that God, or the Christ, is speaking to human beings all the time and it is for the individual to listen in order to sense what is right and wrong and to see the way forward. This breakthrough in understanding gave him enormous confidence and he travelled through Yorkshire and into Westmoreland (now Cumbria) with his message. He was now someone speaking with personal certainty.

**1.3** In the north-west of England Seeker groups were numerous and well organised and the theological exposition that George Fox was developing met their need. At this stage two other remarkable people, James Nayler and Margaret Fell, provided spiritual and administrative leadership, and the Quaker movement was launched into the whole country. A need was being met, and by 1660 somewhere around 50,000 people were attracted to this new spiritual egalitarianism.

**1.4** This social backdrop to the birth of the Quaker Way is not likely ever to be repeated, but the Quaker Way itself met basic human spiritual need in such a way that it still exists today. The spiritual message of that Way is that God relates to every human being directly. An historical review of succeeding centuries doesn't change that spiritual insight. When the principle of religious toleration was extended to all Protestants in 1689, direct persecution of Quakers ceased and they became increasingly respectable and more introspective. In succeeding generations Quaker integrity provided the foundation for Quaker business wealth, which perhaps dissipated the strength of Quaker spirituality. In the nineteenth century evangelical Quakers were the social reformers, but never quite strong enough in their evangelicalism and traditional bible-based roots to cut off the Quaker Way from its unique spiritual roots.

**1.5** In the twentieth century Quaker involvement in the political process, arising largely from the international politics of armaments and the social and economic

destruction caused by warfare, brought many new adherents who might not have had anything like a traditional upbringing in religion. There has been great enthusiasm for political results but not necessarily a clear understanding of the Quaker Way.

1.6 These historical generalisations need much more analysis, but as generalisations they carry a message. The Quaker Way was born in the seventeenth century in spiritual strength, and as we move into the twenty-first century that spiritual strength has become too diluted. The fundamentals of the Quaker Way have not changed. It is concerned with *being* (see 2 below -the Quaker Way as a spiritual path) and results in *doing* (see 3 below the Quaker Way as a social path).

## **2 The Quaker Way as a Spiritual Path**

2.1 The essence of spirituality is something that one can discover for oneself and become empowered by that discovery. You need not know anything about the mystics who have gone before. This was essentially George Fox's story. You have to discover it yourself for the knowledge to be valid. Being told what the essence is will only help you in that you will know where to look to find guidance; *look* into your soul; look through your physical activity into the depths of your being and make the discovery.

2.2 Human beings are the spiritual and physical expression of the creativity of Love. The mind of Love, of our Creator, has produced an expanding time-space bubble which we call the universe. Within that bubble is creation, which is evolution in progress. The spirit moving that evolution is love and it has produced through eons of time the human being who is capable of being the present expression of that love and who will continue to evolve into the future expression of that love. Our Creator never leaves us; our spirituality is innate.

2.3 Everything that has been created, that is human beings and the physical universe, is finite; its life is measured by time; everything has a beginning and an end. Spiritual consciousness and the mind of our Creator we can only understand as being infinite, without limitation, beyond the limits of time. Hence the whole of the finite is held within the embrace of the infinite. The physical world is immersed within the embrace of the spiritual. Our physical body is the finite home for our spiritual *soul*, which is the gateway through the spiritual consciousness that surrounds us into the mind of our Creator.

2.4 The human being is both physical and spiritual -a spiritual person with a temporary physical body. Spiritual implies a relationship with our Creator who is spirit. Ideally we need to be fully aware of that fact from birth, but in our present stage of evolution we are conditioned from birth by our physical and social environment, and in order to come to spiritual maturity we have to work through that conditioning to discover that there is a spiritual environment embracing everything. This spiritual environment, or spiritual consciousness, we come to understand as the embrace of our Creator. Through this embrace we are empowered to move from self-centred consciousness to creation-centred consciousness; from concern for ourselves to concern for the other. Our Creator has never left us to fend for ourselves, but we each have to discover that as a fact, as we come to marvel at and care for the created universe.

2.5 human beings we find ourselves to be the present evolutionary peak of the finite, and are naturally seeking union with the infinite; it is part of our make up, Part of our being. This is the path of mysticism and we believe we enter into that path in the stillness. The brain has developed primarily in response to the need to survive in our physical environment and if we subdue its activity, then we believe we can bring our spiritual soul into prominence -and this is the gateway to the spiritual environment. For millennia individuals have done this, but the Quaker gift to western society is the discovery that the process works powerfully when it is a communal searching. Our understanding of the process may be quite primitive, but together we are relating to that spiritual consciousness in which we exist. We are assisting in the continuing development of evolution, which will lead ultimately to union with our Creator, or, in religious words, will lead to the Kingdom of Heaven. Human beings are more conscious than ever that we are co-creators of the future.

2.6 Seventeenth century Quakers would not have expressed themselves in these terms. Their discovery was experiential -it worked, God did relate to them, and they re-read their bibles and realised that their new discovery was already written there. God was present in the world through the Holy Spirit and present specifically in human beings through the Christ. All human beings had within them the Christ and, to the extent that they recognised this, they had the power to change the world; to bring all people to the same level of recognition of the presence of the Christ within them. In the seventeenth century it was inevitable that they still equated the Christ with Jesus of Nazareth and God present in him. Today we can re-express that understanding in different words but with the same meaning, though more clearly inclusive of all people. In the stillness Quakers sing a new song and it is a powerful one.

2.7 In the mid-seventeenth century people were living at the beginning of the scientific revolution, which was to leave behind the medieval mindset and create the scientific mindset, which assumed that everything could be explained by the principle of deduction. Scientists now know better; they know that the basis of all physical matter is not solid but is in a constant state of flux and that deductive principles fail in this sub-atomic environment. This new understanding may be the link between the apparently physical world and the embrace of spiritual consciousness. What we see as physical is illusory in the sense that it is the outcome of the brain and our sensory system interpreting the electrical impulses which are received from space and that interpretation is determined by our evolution within the solar system. We are children of our solar system. The apparent dualism of physical and spiritual is illusory; the characteristics of each can be recognised but they cannot be disentangled. Those electrical impulses are probably characteristic of both physicality and spirituality. One day science will be able to tell us more about the link between the two and more about what we might call the body of our Creator, but science may never be able to explore the mind of our Creator.

2.8 In response to this new knowledge a new mindset is again being developed, and Quakers are well placed to give it spiritual expression. It is unlikely that this new mindset will necessarily contradict anything fundamental to the understanding of the purpose of human existence as expressed through the life of Jesus of Nazareth, but it must necessarily be based in the culture of the twenty-first century, so that the people of the twenty-first century can relate to it and follow this path of liberation. It is a

path which understands that religion exists as one of the ways of guiding people into spirituality; that spirituality is a journey into our Creator which, because it embraces every aspect of life, is a journey of transformation. Spirituality is innate in creation and religion is a human attempt to codify that spirituality. So the purpose of religion is to lead human beings into an empowering understanding of their spirituality, of their direct relationship with their Creator.

### 3 The Quaker Way as a Social Path

3.1 By first immersing ourselves in our being and not in our activity we transform our character and our attitude to life. We do not yet understand why this transformation happens, but we know that it does and we see it as part of our evolution as human beings. Our understanding of our spirituality is developing. We move from being self-centred to being creation-centred, and the fruits of being creation-centred are reflected in our changing way of life. We are conscious of the needs of society and conscious of the fact that we are dependant on our environment, and the health of that environment becomes of great concern to us. The self-centred self, once necessary to ensure our physical survival, recedes into the background. Its modern reflection is the selfish self, and continuing vigilance is necessary if it is to be prevented from establishing itself.

3.2 There is not a Quaker Way as a spiritual path and another Quaker Way as a social path. The two are interactive all the time in each person. They represent an integration in which their characteristics can be distinguished but they cannot be separated. Like most so-called dualisms, they are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. The message of our Creator is enacted in the way we live our lives. What we 'hear' in the stillness, we live in our daily lives. For those who use religious words it follows that it is in the quality of our lives that the quality of our worship is reflected. Living our Creator's intentions is our acknowledgement of our Creator and is our true worship. The purpose of much church-centred worship is to create a stronger Christian community to strengthen our resolve to live in the world in the way our Creator would want us to do.

3.3 The evolution of community is a success story which has a long way to go. We no longer send small boys up chimneys to dislodge the soot, but we do live in comfort alongside some terrible national and international statistics of social deprivation. Once we have immersed ourselves in our being and listened to our Creator, then struggling with those deprivations becomes the natural outcome of how we live our lives.

3.4 Perhaps in more recent times Quakers have spread themselves over too many concerns. In some respects this can be beneficial. The peace movement is nonviolent because Quakers have been there for more than a century. The animal rights movement has not had that leaven and has developed a violent wing. But dilution of effort across many related organisations may not be the way ahead. It does not allow for the growth of corporate input by Quakers as in the successful development of Circles of Accountability and Responsibility. There are many unpopular causes in the nation and the world that Quakers could possibly adopt. Quaker focus needs to narrow down to some of these causes, gain respectability and government funding for them, and move them into the social mainstream. The world cannot be changed overnight, but there are innumerable small worlds that can be changed. Concentration on the

judicial system and its 'other side of the coin', the prison system, and concern for the mentally unbalanced who are incarcerated could well engage corporate Quaker input for several generations.

3.5 There is an emotional difficulty in engaging with the causes of suffering rather than responding wholeheartedly to the relief of suffering, but by engaging with the causes one might expect to relieve something of present and potential suffering. This is where our testimonies to equality and nonviolence lead us and we must concentrate our resources on tackling the causes, whilst recognizing that there may not be any clear separation from the relief of suffering.

#### 4 The Quaker Way and the Future

4.1 We live in an intensely materialistic society. The opposite side to this coin is that society is spiritually illiterate and both sides are liable to rub off on Quakers as much as on any human beings. In our meetings for worship too many of us are paddling around in the shallows or simply splashing around somewhat aimlessly. We may not see it like that; indeed we may be affronted by the suggestion. But when did we last experience a meeting for worship that was so gathered it drew us into new depths of experience? Future evolution will bring us more sensitivity and more understanding of what we are practising, but to get to that point more application and more discipline are needed. One hour a week is not enough. When do we move forward?

4.2 In general, indigenous people have attempted to live their physical lives in unity with their spiritual consciousness; they know their life is bound into that of creation as a whole and they respect that creation. Our growth into a materialistic civilisation has separated us from that feeling for creation in which creation feeds our spiritual consciousness. With that spirituality lost, society has lost those roots which lead us naturally to respect our environment and we are engaged in a suicidal orgy of exploitation of our environment. But the spirituality of the Quaker Way restores the unity of physical life and spiritual consciousness. We possess a gem which the world desperately needs and we have to trumpet it forth as Quakers did in the 1650s. Other religions and faiths with their attachment to ancient books and ancient texts find it difficult to break through the conditioning of centuries and speak to the modern person. Quakers worship in the present moment, live in the present moment and speak the language of the present moment, all stemming from listening to their Creator in the present moment. If this is western civilisation's greatest need at the present time are we directing adequate resources to meeting that need?

4.3 In our meetings for worship we are letting our Creator do the work. We don't know how this happens; our spiritual sensitivity is not yet great enough to understand the workings of the Spirit, but our faith and our experience lead us to believe that it does happen. In addition to these times of stillness we need meetings for learning, or threshing meetings or discussion meetings, call them what you will, to develop our intellectual understanding of our faith. With an intellectual understanding to underpin our spiritual faith we are better prepared to offer the Quaker Way to others. The regular Sunday meeting for worship could be followed by ten or twenty minutes space in which participants could express whatever may have come to them in meeting but which didn't have the time or the confidence to blossom into ministry. Without that

open space gems may be lost. Are our times of stillness sufficiently complemented by times of learning?

**4.4** There is no passivity in the Quaker Way, and because we live in a very materialistic society time is at a premium. We live at such a pace that we have no spare time. Jesus of Nazareth is reputed to have said 'Let the dead bury the dead'. Let those who are spiritually dead attend to those who are physically dead. How many of us are so wrapped up in the affairs of the world that we are spiritually dead, and have only limited time to spare for the promptings of love and truth in our souls? These promptings represent the fruits of our worship and they must become the embodiment of our worship in daily life. Worship and the fruits of worship are not separable. They are two sides of the same coin. Every opportunity must be given for these fruits to shine forth. Do we create enough space in our lives for that to happen?

**4.5** If we are not giving the fruits of our worship the opportunity to shine forth, then we become a Meeting of individuals who follow their concerns within other organisations, and not a Meeting with a corporate identity pursuing social concern in the community. If this corporate identity exists then the public knows about it and recognises a Quaker concern. November Remembrance is approaching as I write this and the local paper has contacted me to discuss white poppies. The white poppy is not directly of Quaker origin, but peace, or no more war, is a recognized Quaker concern. Do we need to be better known in our local communities for our social concerns?

**4.6** As we believe in the equal value of all human beings in the eyes of our Creator, then our human conscience will be stirred into action by the suffering of much of humankind. This is a reaction from the depths of our being, from our true self, which is now creation-centred, and it will last until the injury to our Creator's being is healed. But the injury to our Creator's being is also environmental. Nature is on the verge of being irretrievably polluted. Have we, both individually and corporately, changed our lifestyles in response to what is a threat of extinction?

**4.7** Society suffers not only from the artificial duality or separation of the physical and spiritual, but there are also other dualisms to be rooted out or otherwise reinterpreted. One can have two sides of the same coin without allowing them to proceed beyond being different sides to becoming opposing sides. In a creation that is fundamentally interwoven and integrated there are no ultimate dualities, not even between good and evil. Good can only be recognised because of the presence of evil, and its job is to transform evil into goodness. Individualism cannot be allowed to be selfish at the expense of community. Every individual must come to live and work within the community for the benefit of the community. The world's material resources are there for the benefit of the world's society. Do we practise what we preach?

**4.8** There has been a manifest failure by the world's faiths to command respect for the idea of stewardship for the benefit of all. The universal religion of materialism has been victorious. A universal materialistic ethic can only be countered effectively by a universal spiritual ethic. It is spirituality that can unite the world's faiths, and spirituality is the Quaker Way. Quaker spirituality transcends all Christian denominations and all faiths. Are we prepared to recognise the enormous responsibility that comes with that insight and act on it?