

## *Quakerism: looking to the future*

First of all, my warmest congratulations to Almeley Wootton meeting on its 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It is not just one of the oldest meeting houses in the country, but also remarkable for its remoteness, still set in fields and half a mile from the nearest village. I think of the act of courage and faith of early Friends in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, founding the Meeting House when holding Quaker meetings for worship was illegal. That local Friends have been able to keep the Meeting House going and indeed add a superb extension in recent times can only stand out as a beacon in relation to national trends and surely has much to tell us.

The topic I have been given of the future of Quakerism is an exceptionally difficult one. I am only too aware of being stretched beyond my intellectual limitations. The topic involves not just looking at the current state of our cherished Society of Friends but also gazing into a crystal ball as to how our world may change. With a third of the country under water and 33 million people displaced, Pakistan is a powerful and poignant example of climate change in the here and now. In Japan nine million people have just been told to evacuate their homes as the country was battered by a super typhoon. The Philippines have been facing 150 mph winds, as just now has Florida. All over the world, large tracts of land are becoming all but uninhabitable. Whole populations are likely to find themselves displaced, leading to migration on a scale that dwarfs anything we have seen so far. Western Europe and the UK in particular may find themselves viewed as a lifeboat – provided always that the Gulf Stream doesn't fail. On top of that, we have a stupefying war in Europe with a total disregard for the environmental impact, combined with threats of nuclear warfare.

On the positive side of the balance sheet, if there is one, we may at last achieve a breakthrough to large-scale nuclear fusion and virtually limitless energy, and be able to capture carbon from the atmosphere on a large scale. But as we approach COP27, humankind would, on the basis of present trends, seem almost bound to respond reactively rather than proactively, with devastating dislocation as a result. We must face the possibility that, in the face of these tumultuous changes, the Religious Society of Friends, along with many other religious organisations, will simply be swept aside.

I first came to Quakerism some 35 years ago: 10% of the time the Meeting House has been in existence. In 1986, there were 31,000 members and attenders. The latest figures, for 2021, put the figure at a little over 18,000 – a drop of 40% in a third of a century. I was looking at these figures because Southern Marches Area Meeting has long been considering how we might attract more children. In this regard, the situation is even more parlous: a decline nationally from 5,623 in 1986 to 1,098 in 2021. From making up one in six (16.7%) of our members and attenders in 1986, children now constitute just 6%. But children are our lifeblood: without young people coming through we can, surely, only continue to wither away.

In large measure these figures reflect national trends. We live in a society in which formal, conventional religion has largely lost its hold – with the notable exceptions of other faiths such as Islam, as well as evangelical Christianity – and where people pursue all kinds of activities that bring them spiritual comfort and challenge without identifying themselves as religious. We are swimming against the tide in a materialist age.

So where will we be in, say, 20 years' time? To answer that I think we first need to look back. Emerging from the religious ferment in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, Quakerism proved to be the sole survivor of the myriad new religious movements that sprang up at that time, such as the Ranters, the Seekers, the Levellers and the Fifth Monarchy Men. It did so, I would suggest, because it was not doctrinal or hierarchical, but gave men and women a direct line to the divine. Ours was an essentially mystical movement. Neither the Protestant intermediary of the Bible nor the Catholic intermediary of the church were essential (although the early Friends were extremely familiar with and influenced by the Bible). This came as a revelation and liberation, one that bubbled as a clear, sparkling stream throughout the early generations of Quakerism.

As the initial enthusiasm subsided, Quakerism became more sect-like and inward-looking. Marrying out was prohibited and there were strict codes of conduct. Quakerism acquired a joyless, forbidding image from which, at least in terms of public perception, I feel it has never quite recovered. Despite the huge contribution made by Quakers towards the abolition of slavery and towards prison reform, with figures such as John Woolman and Elizabeth Fry, matters reached the point in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century where the continued

existence of Quakerism was seriously in question. This applied both in this country and in America, where Quakerism had taken serious root from the earliest days, most notably with the foundation of Pennsylvania, with which this Meeting had such close connections.

In both countries, Quakerism had become more evangelical and orthodox, in Christian terms. In the US, although not in Britain, this saw a split in the movement in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into a number of factions: Hicksites, Wilburites and Gurneyites. These divisions between the silent and the “programmed” traditions persist to this day. The latter approach, with its pastors and conventional church services complete with hymns and a formal order of service, spread to other countries such as Kenya and Bolivia, where most of the Quakers in the world today are to be found.

Quakerism did not, however, wither into insignificance as appeared likely towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What brought about this remarkable turnaround?

In my view, we would not be here today and the Almeley Wootton Meeting House would long since have been disposed of, had it not been for the American Quaker Rufus Jones. Jones lived from 1863 to 1948 and was a Quaker historian and theologian, as well as an academic philosopher. He wrote over 50 books, was instrumental in the setting up of the American Friends Service Committee and may justly be called the father of modern liberal Quakerism. I am not alone in thinking that Rufus Jones was the most influential Quaker since George Fox.

In his book on the origins of liberal Quakerism in Britain between 1860 and 1920, the American Quaker academic Thomas Kennedy “chronicles the metamorphosis of the British Society of Friends from a tiny, self-isolated body of peculiar people into a theologically liberal, spiritually vital association of activists”.<sup>1</sup>

In looking to the future, I feel we have much to learn from this period of British and American Quakerism in the silent tradition. The change brought about by Rufus Jones, aided by Friends in this country such as John Wilhelm Rowntree,

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas C. Kennedy, *British Quakerism, 1860-1920: the transformation of a religious community*. Oxford 2001. Quotation from the jacket.

Joshua Rowntree, William Charles Braithwaite and Rendel Harris, was based on two things: faith and action. Let us look at each of these in turn.

On the faith side, Rufus Jones succeeded in bringing the various strands of Quakerism in America more closely together, based around a return to the mystical origins of our movement. As Kennedy puts it, “Jones’ mystical Inward Light theology was a sort of *deus ex machina*, permitting both the severance of ties with the harsher aspects of evangelical theology and the pursuit of spiritual answers entirely within the intellectually respectable context of modern, optimistic liberal thought.”<sup>2</sup> All this brought Friends in Britain to the point of schism but, in contrast to the US, this did not happen.

The turning point in Britain was the Manchester Conference in 1895. The occasion marked a kind of revolt, or ambush, by young liberals against the established order. The conference turned out to be a sensation. 1300 Friends and attenders showed up. There were 41 addresses in four days, with only brief times for discussion – all very tightly regulated. The vast majority of the addresses were of the new, liberal kind, generating huge excitement. One of the key figures, John Wilhelm Rowntree, stated that “I believe it is sadly too true that spiritual pride, false respectability and unmanly deference to mere wealth or title, have crept into our Church; and wherever they are still to be found we see the melancholy spectacle of an invertebrate Christianity, which in its sluggish self-complacency is even ignorant of its weakness.” One Friend stated “Many of us feel that never in our lives have we so appreciated the privilege of being Quakers as tonight.”

A significant thread to emerge from the Conference was a call for action and social engagement instead of the pursuit of conformity and respectability. This was to play out in subsequent years, starting with the Boer War in South Africa from 1899 to 1902. Liberal Friends took part in various forms of peace witness, some quite risky. Evangelicals, by contrast supported the Empire and the war. These divisions were repeated in the First World War, when again it was the young liberals who were most active in their opposition to conscription and support for the peace testimony. Socialism was also to become a great theme.

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas C. Kennedy, *What Has Manchester Wrought? Change in the Religious Society of Friends, 1895-1920*. <https://journals.sas.ac.uk/fhs/article/view/3487>, p. 291.

In the US, faith combined with action in the form of the establishment in 1917 of the American Friends Service Committee, in which Rufus Jones was a major force. The AFSC was active both at home and abroad, especially in relief work after the war in Russia and Germany. This was on an extraordinary scale, with 3 million people a day receiving meals in Russia alone. In Germany the Quakerspeisung programme after both the First and Second World Wars is remembered to this day. Together with the British Friends Relief Service, the AFSC was engaged in large-scale relief work in continental Europe after the Second World War, culminating in the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947.

In his presentation speech, Gunnar Jahn, chair of the Nobel Committee, recounting that relief work, stressed that it was not the extent of this work, but the spirit in which it was performed that was so important:

"It is the silent help from the nameless to the nameless which is their contribution to the promotion of brotherhood among nations... The Quakers have shown us that it is possible to carry into action something which is deeply rooted in the minds of many: sympathy with others; the desire to help others... without regard to nationality or race; feelings which, when carried into deeds, must provide the foundations of a lasting peace. For this reason, they are today worthy of receiving Nobel's Peace Prize."

Stephen Cary, as director of the American Quaker Relief Operations in Europe from 1946 to 1948, recalls in his memoirs how he called a meeting in Amsterdam of representatives from the relief units scattered across the continent. Morale was low. "By the last afternoon of our four-day meeting," he writes, "we were discouraged company. Our contribution was so small and imperfect and the need so great. Suddenly a Dutch Friend burst in, holding aloft a newspaper with a banner headline: 'Quakers win Nobel Peace Prize... honoured for relief service...' Stunned silence... silence that quickly became a Quaker meeting for worship... the living silence of a gathered community..."

"I thanked God for the gift of commitment... Our sense of fellowship, our love for each other, needed no words. There was only a single message, from a young woman working in devastated Poland: 'All I can say is – a little love goes a long way.'"

So if we look back, Quakers in the US and Britain had become identified in the public mind with action: the abolition of slavery, prison reform, conscientious objection, the Quakerspeisung, Kindertransport, and post-war relief work. Less

well-known has been the quiet conciliation work conducted by Quakers over many years in Northern Ireland, Nigeria, the Balkans, South Asia and elsewhere. Liberal Quakerism, therefore, was not just a theological matter but continued the Quaker tradition of faith in action.

But where has liberal Quakerism taken us? Writing in 1995, Chuck Fager laments that “this harvest petered out somewhere after the First World War. Much of its legacy has since degenerated into what is, on the one hand, little more than ethical humanism with silent meetings, or on the other an effective identification of Quakerism with activist politics of a more or less leftist sort, or on yet another, the equation of the Inner Light with Jungian psychology or some New Age gimmickry.”

Although these views may be a bit extreme, I think we will all recognise that all these elements remain in play today. How often do we hear truly deep, personal ministry? What is the role of the mystical in our contemporary Quakerism? Are we prepared to share the experiences that mean most to us, even if we can't explain them?

It's not downhill all the way. There are hugely encouraging developments, such as Quaker Quest and the Experiment with Light. As I see it, these activities are taking us back to our wordless centre. I also have a strong sense that Friends do share a kind of subterranean awareness of something deeper in life – a sense of presence, a sense of something beyond ourselves, a sense of connectedness, a sense of the centrality of love and compassion. We do, however, have difficulty putting this into words. Instead, Friends live out their inner convictions in all sorts of ways.

So how are we to appeal to others? How are we to survive as a Society? Does it matter if we don't?

I think it does, because humanity faces an existential crisis in the form of climate change. The concluding minute of the Living Witness Gathering at Woodbrooke at the end of August attended by 63 Friends captures the enormity of what faces us: “We have heard clearly, with hope and excitement as well as fear and grief, an acute sense that this is an extraordinary time – a time of enormous challenge which can change us profoundly in ways we need to change. It is the great, holy work of our time, it is our privilege to be part of

it and we must prepare our spirit for what is coming. The climate and ecological crisis changes everything.”

But just when cooperation and commitment are more vital than ever, we find ourselves surrounded by conflict and destruction. The war in Ukraine and other conflicts, and the perceived need for nations to spend 2% or more of GDP on defence, are insane and make one despair about *homo sapiens* as a species. It could be argued that humanity will only survive in any meaningful way if we move to a system of interdependence and cooperation based ultimately on spiritual values, as reflected in our testimonies. It is not that the whole world must become Quaker, but that our fundamental worldview, like that of many faith groups, must be at the heart of how we respond to the crises facing us. Again, as the Living Witness minute states, “We believe Faith groups can take a lead which will help the nation listen, and Quakers must play our part in this.”

For all the things that make us despair, ours is also a species with a widely shared sense of the numinous – something that is if anything becoming more evident with the decline in formal religion in certain parts of the world, not least Britain. So often one hears the refrain that “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” Many of those who in this country tick the “no religion” box on the Census form – the biggest category – would I feel meet that description. As such, one might have thought that Quakerism had an open goal, for ours is a religious movement that is unusually free of dogma and doctrine. It is religion stripped down to its essence. It provides a means for people to give expression to the wordless spirituality they so often feel, and to do so communally, thereby adding a wider and deeper sense of the mystery, at a time when cooperation has become existentially vital.

In this regard David Greaves from our own Area Meeting has written a fascinating monograph entitled *The Final Transformation – Universal Consciousness, Sustainability and Wellbeing* (published 2020). David quotes from Karen Armstrong: “Unless there is some kind of spiritual revolution that can keep abreast of our technological genius, it is unlikely that we will save the planet”<sup>3</sup>. Another quote underpinning his approach comes from Bryan Magee: “What I very much want to see are two mass migrations, one out of the

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<sup>3</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation*. London 2006, p. xi.

shadows of rationalistic humanism to an appreciation of the mystery of things, the other out of religious faith to a true appreciation of our ignorance.”<sup>4</sup>

David argues that humans are religious by nature; humans are fundamentally good; and consciousness is universal. With regard to consciousness, David contrasts two models, the physicalist/materialist model and the interdependent interconnected model. The latter is often described as “ecological” but David prefers to call it “reverential” to bring out its relationship with religion. He sees universal consciousness as permeating the whole of the natural world, both animate and inanimate. These ideas form part of a long philosophical and theological tradition in both East and West and are also beginning to creep into modern scientific thinking. The universal consciousness, David suggests, could be conceived of as what we mean by “God”. A positive transformation in thinking of this kind David sees as vital for our continuing survival, and I would agree. Quoting Satish Kumar, he sees this new consciousness as a consciousness of the unity of life, of caring and sharing and of love.

So what can we do to bring about such a transformation? I feel that what is needed is a revitalisation of our dear Society of similar import to that of the advent of liberal Quakerism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Three things to my mind stand out.

First of all, this will require some deep thinking and a change in the way we give expression to the wordless realm of which we form part. To some extent we are already doing that, in trying to find a language that will have broad appeal and meaning.

One of the difficulties here, I think, is that in moving away from Christianity we are losing a common mythology, along with familiar metaphors and language. Jesus, I would suggest, is generally viewed very differently from what was the case in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and indeed well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Quakers rarely refer now to the Holy Spirit. Even a phrase such as Gospel Order will not sit happily with some Friends. We all know the difficulties of God language. How, then, do we convey our spirituality in a way that will be both broadly shared within the Society of Friends and understood outside it?

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<sup>4</sup> Bryan Magee, *Confessions of a Philosopher. Eight Journey through Western Philosophy*. London 1997, p. 564.



We will need readily accessible terms and metaphors that do not frighten people off because of their old-fashioned connotations, such as worship. Early Friends developed a wonderful diversity of metaphorical language, including expressions such as “the Inward Light”, the “Principle of Life”, “the Guide”, “the Inward Teacher”, “the Inward Christ” and the beautiful and mysterious invocation “sink to the seed”.<sup>5</sup> One of the few such terms to survive is “the Inner Light” (although this is not exactly the same as “the Inward Light”, and loses something). These metaphors work as they are so clearly symbolic.

In revising our terminology, I hope therefore that we will concentrate on and enrich the range of metaphorical terms, bearing in mind Isaac Pennington’s injunction of 1653 that “All Truth is a shadow except the last.”<sup>6</sup> That way, I feel we may well appeal to the many people who might have that feeling of “coming home” if only they were to attend a Quaker meeting, but are put off by the language. Instead, they might look at the noticeboard outside a meeting house with its references to “Meeting for Worship” and “Quakers believe in that of God in everyone” and simply continue on their way. And, let me hasten to add, many of our posters do strike just the right note.

This is not a matter of ditching the past or upbraiding Friends who use terms with which we may feel a bit uncomfortable, but we must also move with the times, especially when it comes to outreach. And far from repudiating Christianity, I would hope that we could rejoice in and remain true to the essence of our Christian traditions and origins, in the same way that early Friends sought a return to primitive Christianity.

Secondly, we could do with another Rufus Jones. Such figures do not, however, come along very often. In all probability we will have to rely on less gravitationally-challenged Friends to carry the banner and show the way. Woodbrooke may well have a key role in this regard, especially with the decline in central staffing levels. My guess would be that a prophetic voice of this kind, whether individual or collective, would be based around the climate catastrophe and the need for a radically different, spirit-led approach.

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://transitionquaker.blogspot.com/2015/08/light-seed-and-guide.html>

<sup>6</sup> Quaker faith & practice 27.22.

Thirdly, and I think most importantly, it will be a matter of living out our faith – of faith in action, and action in faith. This, more than anything, has been what Quakerism has stood for and is known for: the abolition of slavery, prison reform, conscientious objection and peace-building, to name but a few.

Paradoxically, it would appear that the serious decline in our numbers is helping us move in that direction. At Friends House in London, the way in which the staff operate has changed, from one of leading the way to assisting and facilitating initiatives at local level. This change has been forced upon us as we can no longer afford the same kind of staffing levels.

And so the onus falls back on us as Friends, both individually and in our local and area meetings. Our own Area Meeting has been taking forward the Pity of War project to install a memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire to recognise the suffering inflicted by war on civilians. Another important local initiative flowing from the lack of resources at central level has been the establishment of the Quaker Truth & Integrity Group, which has its origins within our Area Meeting and achieved Quaker Recognised Body status earlier this year. Within QTIG, a group of Friends drawn from all over the country are doing what they can to approach the undermining of our democracy and rule of law from the position of a faith group. Truth and integrity are at the heart of our Quakerism. They form one of the key testimonies that we seek to live out in the world. We are known for “speaking truth to power” and at one point (1795) were officially known as “The Religious Society of Friends of the Truth”. Perhaps we need to turn back the clock!

The clerk of QTIG, Gerald Hewitson, has described our task as follows:

“Our view of the world is through a spiritual lens, recognising that we are a religious body. As such, we can recognise that the disorder we are facing is a crisis of the Spirit – one that has recurred in generation after generation, and will continue to occur until humanity puts itself in right ordering with the great mystery at the heart of our being, and at the heart of the cosmos. Without such a right ordering, we will not be able to take the necessary steps, and put in place the structures, to ensure human beings live lives which respect the planet, each other, and the great diversity of life which our beautiful planet upholds.”

Interestingly, there is a similar initiative in the US, where a finely worded *Call to Action* was addressed to Friends in May 2022:

“We Quakers, members of the Religious Society of Friends, hold strongly to the principle of speaking truth with integrity. We ground our speaking truth in our worship and our searching of ourselves, as we listen deeply and honestly within and across all differences. Our testimony to the world includes standing up for spiritually discerned Truth, the equality of all persons, the peaceful resolution of conflicts, and respect and care for our neighbors and the earth. Right now, we see many forces at work in our country and the world that are undermining these basic values.”

Drill right down and I think we may say that our testimony to truth and integrity derives essentially from the sense of presence and the Great Beyond, as Rufus Jones called it, that we encounter in the shared silence of our meetings. It is an experience of oneness, wonder and mystery that takes us to the heart of what it means to be a human being. It involves a sense of oneness, compassion, love, respect and tolerance for all creation. It sees the world as an interrelated whole in which everything, not just our own species, is treated reverentially. We have no sacraments as life itself is sacramental. Action is ultimately grounded in faith.

In his book *The Inner Life*, Rufus Jones talks about the urgent need to “restore faith in the actual reality of God and in the fundamental spiritual nature of the world” and the dangers “if the *soul* of religion wanes or dies away and only the outer form of it remains.”<sup>7</sup> David Cadman suggests in his book *Holiness and the everyday* that perhaps “our present difficulties of global warming and economic disruption are in part caused by a waning of the soul of religion, by the degradation of the holy life amongst us.”<sup>8</sup> In her splendid recent book *Sacred Nature*, Karen Armstrong similarly argues that if we want to avert environmental catastrophe, it is not enough to change our behaviour: we need to learn to think and feel differently about the natural world – to rekindle our

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<sup>7</sup> Rufus Jones, *The Inner Life*, 1917. p. 138.

<sup>8</sup> David Cadman, *Holiness in the everyday*. Quaker Books, 2009, p. 77.

spiritual bond with nature.<sup>9</sup> This must also include the animal world, from which we are all too often so severely distanced.

Connecting with that sense of awareness, both individually and with others, and being true to that sacramental approach towards life is in my view where the heartbeat of the Society of Friends resides. My own feeling is that not just Quakers but the world in general will need to operate from this position if we are to survive in any meaningful way. Humankind will either do so voluntarily, or find that such change is forced upon it by the catastrophic changes that lie ahead.

In the need for humanity to operate from a fundamentally different place, I would accordingly see a very real role for Quakers, one that is at once a challenge and an opportunity. And one that will require the same spirit that has sustained the Meeting in Almeley Wootton since its valiant beginnings in 1672.

How much this plot of former farmland has witnessed over those 350 years: witnessed not just in the sense of all that it has seen, but witnessed as an act of faith and love, a statement to the world beyond.

When I look at this little bit of land, I am reminded of a story told by Rufus Jones about the allotments that were established in Britain in the 1920s to help the poor. Jones recounts how a local curate once visited a newly established allotment on the edge of town and complimented an unemployed man on the magnificent crop he had raised on former wasteland. "Isn't it wonderful what you and God have done with that poor piece of land?" he observed. "Yes," replied the man, "but you ought to have seen it when God had it all by himself."

May this scrap of land and its building, and its people over the centuries and now, continue to light the path that lies ahead of us as Friends and indeed as members of our struggling human race. I give thanks.

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<sup>9</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Sacred Nature*, London, 2022.