

DONALD HODGKIN **Quakerism**



Quakerism

A Mature Religion For Today

Donald Hodgkin



THE QUAKER UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP

...is composed of seekers, mainly, but not exclusively members of the Religious Society of Friends. QUF seeks to promote open dialogue on its issues of interest. It writes in its statement of purpose:

While being convinced of the validity of our own religious paths, we not only accept but rejoice that others find validity in their spiritual traditions, whatever they may be. Each of us must find his or her own path, and each of us can benefit for the search of others.

In the selection of both its speakers and manuscripts, QUF tries to implement those ideas.

ABOUT THIS PAMPHLET This document began as an address to Australia Yearly Meeting in 1971. It was published that year, and reprinted twice. It was then lightly revised, in consultation with Bridget Hodgkin and son Stephen Hodgkin, and printed in a second Australian edition in 1988.

This third, North American, edition came into being when the Quaker Universalist Fellowship went looking for expressions of universalist perspectives in Quaker writings from sources other than Britain and North America.

The text has again been lightly revised, with three goals in view: retaining the spirit and character of the original; casting some of the spoken words into a form more congenial to the reader, especially by dividing some sentences and paragraphs; and using standard North American spelling. Stephen Hodgkin helped in this revision, also.

18. See William Littleboy, *The Appeal of Quakerism to the Non-mystic*. 1916; reprinted by FHSC, 1950. On the very first page he explains that each one of us, including the “non-mystics” of his title, is a mystic in the true meaning of the word.
19. John 13 35 (A.V.)
- 20 *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Originally published 1902, reprinted Mentor Books, New York, 1958, p. 25.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

I have been encouraged to say a little, before coming to the thoughts I want to share with you, on how I came to believe that I had something worth sharing. If I had been asked to give such an address at any time during the last live or six years, I should have had to refuse. I was going through a prolonged period of spiritual dryness, or rather complete aridity, during which I lost even any sense of purpose in life. There was nothing I could say with any conviction or reality. I was not even interested in seeking any meaning or fresh inspiration.

One morning this last August (1970) I woke early and happened to go on reading a book I had begun quite casually, not with any expectation that it would be of particular help to me – Erich Fromm’s *The Art of Loving*. I came to the section on The Love of God, and as I read it, the whole of my life and disjointed thoughts seemed to slip into focus. It was suddenly extremely important to be alive.

I went on living an outwardly normal life, continuing my usual work, but for three weeks I felt lifted onto another plane. Time, much of which I had been misusing, was now filled to the last minute; I could tackle my too-onerous work, which had often overwhelmed me, with confidence; I even needed much less sleep, being too elated, apparently, to sleep. At this stage I twice shared my experience with my meeting, as far as I could. I only hope I was able to convey some of the wonder of the coherence with which everything fitted in: my new understanding of God, my thoughts for the Society of Friends, my work, creative relaxations, personal relationships.

My wife, Bridget, was in England when this happened, and I had to ring her up to share it with her. When we were connected, I was so “full” that I could not speak. For literally fifty seconds I said nothing and was anxious lest she or the exchange might cut me off, thinking there was no connection. It must have been some of the most expensive silence ever! Taking further advantage of our modern technology, I was taping the conversation. That is how I know the length of the silence. On playing it back later I was horrified by my voice. This is a common experience for most of us; we sound so different from what we expect that we wonder if the recording can be faithful. I was horrified because, although full of faith, love, tenderness and spiritual exaltation, I sounded, when I found my tongue at last, like an authoritarian chairman addressing a meeting! If I sound like that now, please forgive me, and accept that I just cannot help it any more than I can reduce my height.

In the months since, I have, as you might say, “sobered down.” No one could live on that plane forever. I have even occasionally felt oppressed, especially when I get too far behind in my work. But I am sure I will not again be so lost from the joy of life. I am speaking now after having gone through the discipline of preparing, in several drafts, what I want to say. I hope the process will not dim the vividness of the insights I sensed five months ago; they are still fresh and true for me.

THE CHALLENGE TO THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

I have been overwhelmed with the sense that we just do not recognize sufficiently what clarity and truth is enshrined in the experience of the Society of Friends over the past three hundred years. If we did, and if we built properly on this, the Society would be infinitely more alive

admirers crying, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” and casting down their garments before him. Not surprisingly, he was convicted of blasphemy and savagely punished according to the ways of the seventeenth century. He came to see his error, and shortly before his death he wrote a most powerful and beautiful description of the spirit in which he sought to live.

10. *Towards a Quaker View of Sex*, FHSC, 1963, pp. 40-41.
11. Attributed to George Fox by his wife, Margaret Fell Fox, and quoted by A. Neave Brayshaw in *The Personality of George Fox*, Allenson, London, 1933, p. 16.
12. As *Advices IV* of our *Advices and Queries* say: “Think it possible that you may be mistaken,” a saying I naturally accept too, however sincerely I advance these views.
- 13 *Advices and Queries*, Query 7.
14. Some useful sources:
 - Thomas F. Green, *Preparation for Worship*. Swarthmore Lecture, 1952. Allen & Unwin, London, reprinted by FHSC.
 - Howard E. Collier, *The Quaker Meeting: a personal experience and method described and analyzed* FHSC, 1949, reprinted 1956.
 - L. Violet Holdsworth, *The Silent Meeting*. Swarthmore Lecture 1919, Allen & Unwin, London.
 - A. Neave Brayshaw, *The Quakers: their story and message*. FHSC, 1970.
 - George Gorman, *Introducing Quakers*. FHSC, 1968.
15. E.G., Phyllis Taunton Wood, *Prayer: a progress*. FHSC, 1965. Frederick J. Tritton, *Prayer in the Present Age*. FHSC, 1967.
16. In *Quaker Findings* (Studies in Fellowship 29). FHSC 1967.
17. *Reality of the Spiritual World*. FHSC, 2nd ed., 1948, p. 32.

NOTES

(In these notes, FHSC is shorthand for Friends Home Service Committee, London)

1. Published by London Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends, but used by Australian and many other Yearly Meetings.
2. We are relieved that at its 1970 meeting the Australian Council of Churches declined to accept a new constitution which would require member churches to subscribe to a creedal statement. Faced with a similar situation in Britain, London Yearly Meeting had to cease to be a full member of the British Council of Churches, which did adopt such a formal basis for membership.
In *Search for Reality in Religion* [Swarthmore Lecture, Allen & Unwin, London, 1965, p. 70], John Macmurray says: "The central conviction which distinguishes the Society of Friends... cannot be defined in terms of doctrinal beliefs; what makes us Christians is an attitude of mind and a way of life; these are compatible with wide variations and with changes in beliefs and opinions."
3. *God is Silence*, FHSC, 1970.
4. *The Art of Loving*, Unwin Books, London, Sixth Impression, 1968.
5. *ibid.*, p. 54.
6. *ibid.*, p. 60.
7. John 4:24 (N.E.B.)
8. As William Penn says in *Fruits of the Spirit*, 1.519: "The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask, they will know one another, tho' the divers liveries they wear here make them strangers."
9. James Nayler was a contemporary of George Fox. Fox recognized Nayler's gifts, but also his weakness. Nayler allowed himself to be led on a horse into Bristol by

and effective for more people. Not that we want growth for its own sake, but because countless more people are looking for the sort of approach which Friends can offer. We are failing them if they cannot find us, or if, having found us, they see only a pallid reflection of what our Society ought to be.

That Quakerism has relevance for today may be suggested by the fact that the seven Friends who have given the Backhouse Lectures (to 1970) have been, not theologians or historians, but three scientists, a poet, an economist, a philosopher, and a headmaster. That is not to say that a theologian or an historian would not be a welcome lecturer in due course!

We can learn from and be inspired by previous generations of Friends, from George Fox onwards, but our vision and our expression of it must not be limited by theirs. We do not want what has been called *Quakerwasm* instead of *Quakerism*. This capacity to keep up-to-date is illustrated by the fact that the collection of Quaker writings known as *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends*¹, the nearest thing we have to a statement of our beliefs, is not a static set of words handed down from the seventeenth century of George Fox, but is revised periodically, most recently in 1925 and 1959.

My belief in the potential of the Society of Friends is not founded on conceit or complacency; much of the treasure is indeed potential, not actual. There is a constant challenge to us to make the most of our opportunities, both so that we may become more complete persons ourselves and so that our Society may prove powerfully attractive to those drawn to it. It is, perhaps, not likely to become a mass movement, but we should not be limited in our expectations of its growth.

I am consciously speaking of the Society as it might and should be. It is composed of very human members who

constantly fail to live up to their aspirations, so that the Society in practice does not always achieve these heights. If we know what it should be, however, we are more likely to approach that ideal.

The Society is not an end in itself, but a means to help those associated with it to find fulfillment. But in seeking to make the most of the Society we are more likely to find that fulfillment. We need such a framework, as it is a very rare person who can go far along the spiritual road in isolation.

What is then so distinctive and precious about the Society of Friends? Very briefly, I would suggest the following as some of its chief characteristics:

1. It is based on the experience of the presence of God, not on acceptance of statements about God. This experience comes directly to each of us, not through any intermediary. There is that of God in every person.

2. We seek for truth, from whatever quarter it may arise, so that our understanding of God, our faith, is never in conflict with our reason. This keeps Quakerism a modern and mature religion.

3. We build on the good in people, not denying people's capacity for evil, but believing that they are more likely to reject evil if we have faith in their capacity to be true to the best in themselves.

4. Our faith has an impact the whole of our lives. The worlds of the spirit and action are one; ours is not a "Sunday religion."

5. The Society is universal in the sense that no one who is drawn to our meetings and to our understanding of life is excluded because of their particular background or present beliefs.

6. We are not drawn to the Society for our own salvation, but to play our part toward a better

THE SEARCHER'S PRAYER

by Ruth Fawell

You know well how the search for reality
Goes on throughout our lives,
How truth must always find new language,
New symbols.
Help us while we walk the pilgrim way
Of searching and re-searching
To hold fast to what we know of truth,
To heed the promptings
Of truth and love
In our own hearts
And in the world around us
Which only grow in us
As we obey the given light,
And dwindle as we disobey.

Strengthen us, we pray you,
To live them out
This day and every day,
So that our wills are fortified
By your will,
Our loves
By your love,
And our fragments of truth
By your truth.

with the established order. Whether they would accept the term or not, I believe most young people today are genuinely seeking a meaning in life, and I believe too that the Society of Friends could help many of them find it.

Jesus spoke in the words understandable in his day. We risk making our churches and meeting houses into archaic survivals, without appeal to or significance for the modern generation, if we go on using the thought forms and words which were central to the amazingly powerful evangelical revival of the nineteenth century. We still have much to learn in methods of making known what we have to offer in terms which have appeal today. We are not trying to convert people to Quakerism, but to make it available to those who have a natural affinity to our outlook. For many of them, the word *Quaker*, if it means anything, signifies a quaint historical group of people in top hats and poke bonnets. Others hold slightly more favorable images: a relief organization, a manufacturer of porridge oats, or an outmoded puritanical sect, quite out of touch with modern life.

Writing in 1902, William James could say of the founding of Quakerism by George Fox: "In a day of shams, it was a religion of veracity rooted in spiritual inwardness, and a return to something more like the original gospel truth than men had ever known in England."²⁰ Can we not ensure that James' description is as true of the Society today? We need to make clear that this religion of veracity does not flout our knowledge or experience, but is enriched by being consistent with them.

I should like to finish with a poem which seems to me to sum up much of what I have been saying. For it emphasizes the need for each of us to discover the truth for ourselves, to go on seeking, and to be faithful to the truth we have found.

world. We begin by making our own meeting a group of caring people, caring for each other and then for the wider world.

I am not now going to develop each of these points systematically. I am not trying to give you yet another straight description of the Society of Friends, when this has already been done well by others. I propose to pick out certain aspects of what, as I see it, it means to be a Friend today, in a way which may challenge us all to make our Society still better, a means of helping us, and many more outside it, to live fuller lives.

FRIENDS AND THE CHURCHES

Many Christians in the churches would endorse all or most of these six statements, but I doubt that any church could accept them as a sufficient basis for its existence. For many years this has made me uneasy about our links with the ecumenical movement. We are not a small, rather odd, worthy, and oh so respectable sort of cousin of the bigger churches. We have an entirely different approach to religion. This does not require hostility to the churches, but we should be hoping that they will come our way, rather than emphasizing our need to understand and share theirs. This sounds terribly conceited from a member of such a tiny group against the millions of the organized churches, but I can only say what I believe to be true. I admit, however, that I have deliberately overemphasized my point to make sure it is taken.

There are very many sincere adherents of the churches with whom, as individuals, Friends can feel very close indeed. My uneasiness relates to their organized churches. I cannot believe that anyone who has in some measure experienced the presence of God and has remained faithful to this

experience can insist that acceptance of particular theological ideas or forms of words is a necessary sign of inward grace, however important these may be to that person in his or her life. These creedal forms may, it is true, serve as the basis of membership of the Christian “club,” but if it is insisted on for this purpose Friends are likely to be excluded from the club.²

I hope that what I have said about our relationship with the churches will not be taken as a regressive and rearguard action against the generally welcomed growth in ecumenical spirit. I know that many very experienced Friends give much time and loving thought to means to break down barriers in the service of the one God.

We can and should work with the churches in many ways. My concern is that as we work in unity with the churches we should not falsify our position by suggesting that we shall ever participate in *union*. And too close an identification with *the* Church would suggest to those who are still outside the Society, and find the Church unable to meet their need, that the Society’s beliefs and outlook must be so similar that they can dismiss the Society as well.

WHAT FRIENDS BELIEVE

Church members, and perhaps others, may ask what Quakers do believe, since they are so free from creedal statements. Though there are many pointers, there is no complete answer to this question. We are bound together as like-minded people in a common search for the truth of the world of the spirit, strengthened by the sense that we sometimes find.

Conceptions such as *God* are by their very nature so intangible that words must fail; it is easier to describe what God is not than what he is. Even to use the words *God* and

than in plugging away at an important objective year in, year out. And most worthwhile objectives need this constant and continuing effort. The occasional demonstration, or letter to the Prime Minister, or statement to the press, can be important and can arise “in the life,” but they will not often miraculously and immediately achieve the change in the situation which they seek. There is the need for the concerned individual or small group to give this purpose a high priority in their lives, to be the conscience of the Society in this matter, and to tell the rest of us when we can do something to help.

CONCLUSION

I hope the Society may be a community to which may turn

- acknowledged Christians seeking an alternative to their present church;
- the searching humanist who comes to feel that there may be some power outside ourselves but who reacts violently against set forms and rigorous theology;
- the rationalist who begins to see that it is possible for a power to exist beyond the possibility of reasoning proof, but not in conflict with reason;
- someone from another culture who can respond to our approach.

There was a great advance in the Society at the turn of the last century, in what was known as the Manchester movement, led by such figures as John Wilhelm Rowntree in England and Rufus Jones in America. It may be that we are called to another rethinking of our position now, faced as we are by a revolution in thought by those disenchanting

in life which makes one want to make all things new for the benefit of humankind. In either case we need to watch this tendency. Friends are very properly concerned about peace; the rights and welfare of Aborigines; race relations more generally; conservation and anti-pollution; poverty in underdeveloped countries in an era of affluence; poverty nearer home, especially among old people. I could go on.

But Friends do not need to set up an organization to deal with each of these problems. In most cases we can act as other citizens would, and work through community organizations. And each of us must not think, "Because I feel that this one or these two or three causes are the most important to me, other Friends are letting me down if they don't join me in this major effort." The Society should and often does find means to learn about its members' concerns, whether within or outside the Society, whether in daily work or volunteer service. Members support one another by understanding and sympathy, sometimes financially, and – if they use the term – by their prayers. Most important, we should not so devote ourselves to these good causes that our lives lose the richness of inspiration and imagination. These too demand time. In the words of one of the greatest Quaker pacifists, the Swiss Pierre Ceresole, "Pacifism is the fruit, not the root, of Quakerism." Or, to change the metaphor slightly, cut flowers will surely die. Our Quaker forebears warned us against excessive "creaturely activities." This was not a derogatory term; it distinguished practical affairs from the development of our spiritual life.

Despite what I have been saying, it is often rewarding if a large proportion of a meeting can come together for a common purpose, whether it be in a silent vigil for peace, or in a working-bee to spring-clean the meeting house. Such unity in action is very good. It is more likely to occur, however, in special isolated efforts like those mentioned,

he will alienate some and will conjure up wrong images for others. Nevertheless, just as Pierre Lacout had to find words to express his belief that "God is silence,"³ it seems necessary to say rather more.

I have found Erich Fromm very helpful, though he is not a Friend, or even a theist. In his section on the love of God in *The Art of Loving*⁴ he contrasts the earlier matriarchal conception of God, whose love is unconditional and all-protective, and the patriarchal conception of a father who is just and strict, rewarding or punishing, with the mature religion in which God ceases to be personalized in these ways and becomes a symbol of those good qualities with which he is normally associated, such as love, truth and justice. Fromm goes on to say that "the logical consequence of monotheistic thought is the negation of all *theology*, of all *knowledge* about God."⁵ He also contrasts the West's basing of religion on thought, following Aristotle, with the Eastern approach based on experience, an approach shared by Western mystics such as Meister Eckhart. Emphasis on thought leads to dogmas, intolerance and heresy-hunting, in the effort to crystallize what cannot be crystallized. In the Eastern approach "the love of God is an intense feeling experience of oneness, inseparably linked with the expression of this love in every act of living."⁶

The idea of God as *ground of being* is meaningful for many Friends, but for most this would not conflict with Jesus saying, "God is spirit."⁷ All these expressions avoid any personalization of God. Yet I cannot think of God as non-personal. This force, the spirit of God, within, yet beyond us, does support us in pain, anxiety or bereavement, It encourages and inspires us in the search for truth, sustains us through the necessary but monotonous or less creative activities of daily life. It heightens our joy in beauty, whether of nature, music or art, or in personal relationships. Though

it is greater than we are, we respond to what we recognize as caring for each of us. We simplify by calling this power *love*.

The characteristics of this power are surely personal, so I can't say *it*. For lack of anything better, I have used *he*, while trying to avoid in my mind any correspondence with a physical being, or thinking of him as male any more than female. When we have difficulty comprehending what this God is, we can look to the picture given us by Jesus. His references to *my Father* were necessary to the thought modes of the time, and to draw a sharp contrast with the Jewish image of a God of justice rather than of love. Nowadays we need to use the word *Father* with care, if we are not to limit unnecessarily our conception of that spirit which is God.

One thing is certain. I am not speaking of a man-centered religion, or even one where God is made in the human image. It is very much a God-centered religion, but centered toward a God not cramped by definitions which will satisfy some but estrange others, toward a God each of us finds in our own experience.⁸ It is the same God. It is our approach and our response which differs, just as each of us will respond differently, and perhaps differently on different occasions, to a symphony, a poem, or a great work of art.

We must admit that there are dangers, at least for some, in the freedom of the religion I have sought to outline. People who are emotionally unstable may be swept off their feet, instead of finding surer ground. This danger is probably the main source of criticism of our Society by the churches: that there is no objective standard, no rein on the individual's thoughts, whims or even their mental imbalance, as in the well-known case of James Nayler.⁹ A great protection against this danger is the corporate experience of worship together and the loving guidance of fellow members of the Society. The exercise of this guidance is certainly demanding, both

if ye have love for one to another."¹⁹ Caring may and should begin within the community, but it will inevitably extend beyond it. What is caring? It is the product of prayer. If you take time to think about other people you will often find ways in which the relationship between you can be improved, to your as well as the other's benefit. This will not necessarily lead to any action or words, either immediately or at all. The other would often react against an overt invasion of their privacy. But it does lead to a sensitivity which will enable you to respond to any need which may arise, to see where you have failed and to prevent you sitting in judgment on others. You find that you are "coming to know each other in that which is eternal." This is very different from the chatty, tea-drinking friendliness which sometimes maligns the fundamentally precious word *fellowship* – not that I object to friendly talk or drinking tea!

The development of this caring community is naturally aided by the community being relatively small. This fact, taken with my earlier reference to the size of worshipping groups, indicates the need to be alert to the possibility and desirability of establishing new meetings as soon as the community is big enough.

Caring is not at all patronizing. An older person can care for the apparently irritating and certainly noisy child, as the child can care for the older person; the activist and the contemplative can care for each other.

FAITH IN ACTION: Social and International Concerns

Since ours is an everyday religion, it will be reflected in the work we do, our home life and our relaxations. We are likely also to be active in what rather slightly may be called good causes. At one extreme this stems from tradition and a sense of duty; at the other, from an overwhelming joy

active relation with the Eternal Life. I do not think this is a psychological impossibility, or an abnormal thing.”¹⁷

By experience I do not mean only the profound and often sudden and unexpected flashes of insight which come to some people and give them undoubted assurance and continuing joy. William James calls those who have had this experience the twice-born. Though this phrase reminds us of Jesus saying that we must be born again, James does not suggest that those who have been fortunate enough to have this experience are any better than the once-born who have reached similar depths by a less dramatic and more consistent life lived in the presence of God.¹⁸

There is, in fact, little difference in the needs of the twice-born and the once-born, since the former needs the continuing experience of life with God just as much as the latter. The twice-born have not had a once-for-all experience, on the spiritual capital of which they can live for the rest of their lives. Both the twice-born and the once-born would probably agree that the religious life is ordinary life lived at a deeper level. Experience is not words, nor, except very rarely and to a very few people, is it visions. It is the readiness to be responsive to what early Friends called “leadings;” we find that as we respond to what we sense to be right for us, still greater truth and insight is given to us. If we ignore or even fight against these leadings our life becomes poorer and our vision dimmer. It is the opening of doors which we can go through or can pass by. It is the building of a strong thread of life instead of having it raveled and made useless. This experience is not only for a few rare mystics; it can be for everyone.

THE MEETING AS A CARING COMMUNITY

A Meeting needs to be a caring community but not a cozy one. “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples,

for those who need to offer, and those who need to accept it. But the more religiously mature both are, the more likely it is that this speaking of truth in love will enrich and not embitter.

One of the main themes in that unofficial but widely welcomed booklet, *Towards a Quaker View of Sex* (1963) was the need for a deeper morality than that established by contemporary *mores*, however they are defined. It points to the need for a morality “that will enable people to find a constructive way through even the most difficult and unproductive situations... Morality should be creative. God is primarily Creator, not rule-maker... the responsibility that [this] implies cannot be accepted alone; it must be responsibility within a group, whose members are equally committed to the search for God’s will...”¹⁰

ARE QUAKERS CHRISTIAN?

One of the most frequent questions asked at discussions on the Society of Friends is whether the Society is Christian. The easy answer is “Yes,” and one can point to numerous quotations and statements which justify this. I too would reply, “Yes,” but it depends on what you mean by Christian. I see the Society as a Western-based group built on the mystical approach more commonly found in Eastern religions. It is based on experience, not on thought. These are not mutually exclusive; learning can enrich experience, but it is not a prerequisite. There are many people of profound mystical experience in the Western churches, despite the formidable theological thought structures of those churches. And thought and words are necessary for intelligible, helpful communication from even the most experienced mystics.

I believe, however, that Quakerism will often have more in common with true seekers outside the churches than

with some official spokesperson of the churches. The essence of the Quaker faith is the personal experience of each member. "You will say, Christ sayeth this, and the apostles say this: but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light, and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?"¹¹

But this God within us would be a poor and primitive thing if we relied on our own thoughts to recognize him. We need the help and guidance of others. Some at least will be helped by Eastern mystics, some by the great Roman Catholic mystics. But I believe that everyone can be helped by the life, teaching and person of Jesus, imperfectly recorded and transmitted as are our accounts of him. I believe he so pre-eminently showed us what God is and should mean to us, as to warrant our calling our Society Christian. We follow him above all others.

I should, nevertheless, be grieved if this statement prevented anyone from joining the Society because that person was unwilling to be called a Christian. I should be equally grieved if it should shock, or keep out of the Society, those for whom the bodily resurrection is the key to the Christian message. If both of these have charity to accept that theirs is not the only truth¹², they should be able to join in the experience of worship with those whose thoughts are nearer those I have been indicating. I hope the Society can in some measure be a bridge between the East and the West.

This does not mean that I am advocating a syncretic religion, where everything goes. Quakers would not wish to adopt all characteristics of some Eastern religions, and I would not expect anyone who is fully satisfied with the finer expressions of Buddhism or other faiths to turn to Quakerism. Anyone coming to the Society needs to accept that its whole frame of reference has been in the Christian tradition.

clear enough what we mean. German Friends do not speak of worship; their meetings are referred to as *Die Andacht*, or "thinking upon." If *meeting* by itself is unacceptable, is it too late for someone to come up with an appropriate word out of the richness of the English language?

PRAYER AND EXPERIENCE

I should define what I mean by *prayer* and *experience*. In referring to prayer, I hope that no one will think that I mean by this a mere repetition of some set form of words, however inspired or however helpful such words may sometimes be. I will use *prayer* to mean any opening of the heart to God. It may be a brief, ejaculatory thanksgiving, such as, "Oh God, it's good to be alive!" It may be a longer period of personal preparation, meditation, intercession perhaps, or contemplation.

Others have written on the forms and meanings of prayer in a mature religion.¹⁵ One of these, Harold Loukes, gives us a fuller definition:¹⁶ "Prayer is not words or acts, but reaching down to love; holding our fellows in love, offering ourselves in love; and being held by, being caught up in, love. It is communion, an opening of the door, an entry from beyond. This is the point where secular language fails, for this cannot be spoken about at all; it can only be known."

Thomas Kelly has written inspiringly of life lived at two levels simultaneously. He was an active practical man, and also a modern saint. What most impresses me in his writing is its authority. You cannot doubt that he wrote of what he knew in his own experience. "This practice of continuing prayer in the presence of God involves developing the habit of carrying on the mental life at two levels. At one level we are immersed in this world of time, of daily affairs. At the same time, but at a deeper level of our minds, we are in

people who are accustomed to breaking the silence and who, in a larger group, should be, but are not always, more sensitive than usual about speaking only when they really must if they are to be faithful to the spirit. The other is that some present may feel they can be “passengers,” hoping that somehow the meeting will give them strength, encouragement and joy without their making much effort. The quality of a meeting as a whole, as well as the response any individual member feels, is undoubtedly dependent on the contribution brought by each one present. Although one can certainly not say that there is any ideal size, my belief is that for regular meetings, as distinct from special occasions, it is easier to maintain the quality of worship with about twenty to forty, or perhaps up to fifty or sixty, than with larger groups. Modern group theory endorses Jesus’ choice of a group of twelve disciples.

Incidentally, though I know I have been using the word *worship*, I wonder if other Friends ate sometimes a little worried about the use of the term *meeting for worship*. I am not too worried, because I have lived with it so long I don’t think much about it. But how does it strike the newcomer? What is worship and how often do we do it in our meetings? *Meeting* is a fine and important expression, conveying just what we are doing: meeting with each other and God. Praise and thanksgiving, the larger part of what most people would understand as worship, may be helpful steps for some of us in bringing ourselves in tune with the infinite, but they are surely only steps toward that experience of oneness with the spirit to which we aspire in our meetings. To drop the words *for worship* may make some fear that we shall think in human-centered terms because *meeting* is such a common word: we meet trains and have public meetings for very secular purposes. In many cases the fear could be overcome by referring to *Quaker Meeting* if the context does not make

It may be asked whether I am really seeking to interpret what the Society of Friends is, or whether I am trying to make it conform to my own views. Part of the answer may be that for me, and I believe for many other Friends, there is no other group even approaching in outlook what we hold to be important. If we had to start a new group, it would be remarkably like the present Society of Friends!

I have not the time now, even if I had the capacity, to offer a thorough analysis of the Society’s thought on the nature of Christianity. But I would suggest that it is significant that most of the phrases that spring first to one’s mind as characteristic of the Society’s outlook do not refer specifically to Christ. I am thinking of “Inner Light;” “Walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone;” “What canst thou say?” James Nayler’s “There is a spirit which I feel that delights to do no evil...” One phrase I use as frequently does refer to Christ: “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition.” But I use it more because this was a part of Fox’s whole thought form than because of any theological implication.

THE MEETING FOR WORSHIP

This constantly repeated insistence on experience as central to the life of the Society is nothing new; all Quaker writers are likely to emphasize it. It is, in particular, the key to our meetings for worship, which in turn are at the heart of our Society. If they fail, we shall be impoverished, and new inquirers will find little to attract them. These meetings are meaningless if we do not believe that we can experience in them the presence of God. But do we act on the implications of this belief? Do we really come each week “with heart and mind prepared,”¹³ and not as a habit, but in the joyful and confident expectation that we shall be enriched

by our time together? Do we help newcomers enough to use the time best? Some will immediately feel at home in our meetings, realizing that this is what they have been longing for. But these are not the only ones who may later wish to join us. Sitting in quietness for an hour, possibly without any words, is such an unusual experience in this age that not everyone can accept it readily. There are many admirable introductions to the meeting for worship.¹⁴ We should be familiar with these, both for our own enrichment and to enable us to recommend the one or two likely to be most suitable for a particular newcomer.

The power of the meeting for worship comes from the fact that each meeting is essentially a fresh experiment, and any experiment can fail. But the successes should so outnumber the failures as to be the norm. Paradoxically, success is more likely if we think of the weekly meeting not so much as the pinnacle of the weeks religious activity but as an important incident in our continuing life with God, which may be reflected too in other unprogrammed times of quiet worship with one or two others as occasion offers. We should be able to rescue something, an hour of quiet in this hectic, noisy world, even from the meetings which seem relative failures. The fault, of course, may only have been in us; others may have found them very rewarding.

We often refer to a speaker as inspiring, or to writing as being inspired. But since communication is a two-way affair, it is surely just as important that the hearer or reader be inspired. Much the same is true of great music, where all three – composer, interpreter, and listener – need to be inspired. If we are casual in our listening to music, or are tone-deaf, no performance can mean much to us. The same is true of our reading of the Bible or any other potentially helpful work. Unless we are really trying to share the experience of writers, much of what they are trying to say will escape us.

Inspired listening is also important in our Quaker meetings, though here sometimes we also need an imaginative charity to get at what is being said by a speaker who may well be inspired, but is less gifted, or trained, to convey profound truths than the great composer is to bring out the music that grows within. If an inspired speaker can have inspired listeners, they will all come very close to the source of that inspiration.

We could well deepen the quality of our meetings for worship by deepening other gatherings. Instead of fully programmed study weekends and summer schools, we could have some times together, preferably residential, based on the spirit of worship, meditation, or retreat, on a theme such as prayer, or the meeting for worship, without set addresses. As many as possible would have prepared themselves with thoughts and readings which could be used, if this seemed right, as the period ripened.

Owing to human frailty, the numbers coming together can affect the quality of worship. When speaking of numbers I am referring to those aged fifteen or more, accepting that younger ones can readily be carried by the older group. In saying this, I am not unmindful of the real spiritual insights which can come to very young children, or of the enrichment which comes to a group from the sense of an enlarged “family” worshipping together.

At one extreme, we all know the wonder of times “where two or three have met together in my name.” At the other, there can be times of profound experience at London Yearly Meeting, for example, with several hundred present. I would suggest, however, that as numbers increase, so do the hazards to the quality of worship. If we were all perfectly seeking in utter humility to know the presence and the will of God, numbers should not matter. But in a larger group there are at least two dangers. There are likely to be more