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*"For I know the plans I have for you,"  
declares the LORD, "plans to prosper  
you and not to harm you, plans to  
give you hope and a future."*

*Jeremiah 29:11*

**Johnson Lecture**

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**Living in a New World**

**By John Punshon**

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# LIVING IN A NEW WORLD

## Friends, the Future and the Words of Jeremiah

By John Punshon

*“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord,  
“plans to prosper you and not to harm you,  
plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11*

### 1. BEING HAPPY

I don't know about you, but I have always been very clear in my own mind that we have been put here to be happy. I am not perhaps privy to the deepest secrets of the cosmos, but I cannot conceive that it is either hostile or neutral towards us. The universe seems to me to be both purposeful and mysterious, and we are designed to enjoy finding out about it. This is not easy, and we certainly have to take account of chance, tragedy and uncertainty. But these things are not ultimates. Happiness is not a negative condition, something that we have in the absence of other things. It is positive. To be happy is to live in accordance with nature, the way things are. Happiness is sustained by curiosity, risk-taking and wonder. It is a moral and not an emotional condition.

The title of this lecture, and the conference for which it was written, is a quotation from the prophet Jeremiah, about whom I shall have quite a bit to say in due course. He is not the first name that springs to mind in a discussion of happiness, so I had better say why I have introduced this theme at the very beginning.

My concern is with the Religious Society of Friends, or the Friends Church as it is more familiarly known to most of us, and what sort of future it may have. There is no historical guarantee that Friends will continue to exist, and the lesson of history so far seems to indicate that our Society has survived for three centuries because of its ability to change while preserving its essential nature. I have spent my life as a member of it and I have been very happy in doing so. Otherwise I would have packed my tent and crept away. But my happiness is not, as I indicated above, a warm, fuzzy feeling. Rather, it is a matter of conviction.

I entitled my account of evangelical Quakerism *Reasons for Hope*<sup>1</sup> because those words came from Scripture and reflect the Christian part of my educational heritage. But the other part, the classical, is in some circumstances equally important. The conditions of happiness were then, as now, the subject of debate, but nevertheless, people knew that what prompted pleasurable feelings in human beings were of various sorts — strong, weak, simple, refined, physical, mental and so on. The reflective life is what enables us to sort these things out and pursue those which give us the greatest pleasure, or happiness.

An important prerequisite of this task is to have a conception of what it means to be human, to understand our nature, capacities and potential, the things that make us what we are. We also need to have some conception of the possibilities open to us as members of society. In other words, we need to have an answer to the age-old question about what is good, because it is the good that makes us happy.

Happiness needs to be distinguished from both pleasure and contentment, things inseparable from happiness but not quite the same thing. Both pleasure and contentment carry a risk, because we like to cling on to them, and when we have them we are reluctant to let go. We risk complacency, the sense that everything is in order and we can rest on our laurels. Happiness, in the terms I have defined it, is not like that. What distinguishes the real deal is that it is a process and not a condition. It has the excitement of impermanence, the thrill of the journey, the excitement of a continuing enquiry into the causes of things.

Complacency is a danger because it represents counterfeit happiness. It is staying where you are because things cannot possibly be better anywhere else. Voltaire lampooned Dr. Pangloss because he thought he lived in the best of all possible worlds. In fact, he lived in the worst. It was a world of his own, with no contact with reality.

If I am right, and that happiness comes through reflection on the circumstances of our own lives, we will necessarily be involved in a consideration of how we fit into a larger picture. How we see the context of our lives is crucial to our self-understanding and our personal happiness. I won't quite go so far as to say that context is all, but it counts for a lot.

In the text we have taken for our theme, God is making a promise. It was made in certain specific historical circumstances, though we also believe that carries a message for us. So how can we discern that message? We might take reassurance and encouragement from this text and go away happy. But it would be the happiness of Dr. Pangloss, devoid of reality. These words were spoken to people who had lost homes and possessions and been carried off into captivity. They were offered hope and a future, but not immediately. For the time being they were to make the best of a very bad lot.

We tend to fall into this trap when we approach the Bible as a series of texts, each of which has an independent, uplifting message. Happiness is getting the message rather than seeing the meaning, because the meaning comes from what goes before and what comes after, just like our own lives — the context, in a word. It requires effort to read the Bible in this way. That is why I drew a distinction between the happiness that comes from immediate satisfaction and the happiness that come from understanding, which is another way of describing an encounter with the truth.

The truth generally comes to us through context. We have all had the experience of a flash of understanding, and our ordinary vocabulary reflects this. We realize, grasp, intuit, perceive, the light dawns, the penny drops. Each of these expressions implies that as individuals we suddenly see the meaning of a set of circumstances that was previously hidden from us. And if I am right about this, the process of gaining understanding is cumulative. The wider the context of our knowledge becomes, the more we understand.

So I am going to look at our text in this way and try to apply it to the circumstances of what John Bright called “our little church,” for great though its historical character may be, it is nevertheless small. We live on the edge, as we have always done, and that is probably what God intended us to do. But to understand ourselves, and to try to discern our future and what it is realistic to hope for, we have to see ourselves in the context of our times.

An analogy can be drawn between the life of an individual and the life of a body of people like the Society of Friends. Over time, our character is determined by the choices we make. Every time we make a choice, we close off other possible lines of development for ourselves by the simple fact that we have *not* chosen them. We like to think of ourselves as free, but the act of exercising our freedom paradoxically places restrictions on us. We do not act out of character because to do so habitually would be to destroy the character we have and substitute another for it.

For an individual, as for a group, therefore, present character is the result of previous choices and decisions, and to explain the character of the present we need some sort of biography — an account of the challenges that have been faced in the past and the responses that have been offered to those challenges. A biography that simply recited the facts of a person’s life would be a bore. One that sets a life in context will be much more interesting. What I want to do here is to look at the wider influences that will determine the future character of the Society of Friends and make just a few suggestions about how we might go about responding to them.

## 2. WHAT WE HAVE TO BUILD ON

I first gave the Johnson Lecture at Greensboro in 1987, under the title, *Patterns of Change*,<sup>2</sup> shortly after I had discovered, to my enormous interest, the variety and vitality of American Quakerism. I think I would stand by much of what I wrote there, but I am also aware that time has moved on. That lecture represents my coming to terms with the continuing influence of the separations of just-under two centuries ago, and how the different and estranged members of the family could live together in what was then increasing familiarity. So I need to ask how much of what I said then remains relevant for today.

The phrase I used to characterize us at that time was “confident distinctiveness.” I think the period was marked by a change in the means whereby the common ground between the branches was being explored. The age of the Quaker leaders nurtured by Civilian Public Service in the second World War was passing as many of these folks entered retirement, and instead of personal interest and example, the dialogue among Friends was increasingly carried on in what I would broadly call the Quaker Studies movement, associated with our schools and colleges, magazines, periodicals and many individuals in both branches interested in exploring in greater detail what the religious heritage of Friends actually is.

During this period, I argued for a certain understanding of history as the means of dialogue and reflection. One has to be careful with the humanities. The humanities are as dangerous as their subject matter and can be as constructive or destructive as the human race itself. It is a matter of motive. The study of history makes demands on us that we must be sure we have the resources to deal with. The search for truth requires honesty, so to search the past for self-justification, which I think we all tend to do, is morally self-destructive, changing the focus of our enquiry from the truth to our own desires, a species of idolatry, perhaps.

Indeed, one way of studying the Quaker past is to use it as a means of self-justification. At times, interpretations of our history have been produced that have been used in the doctrinal disputes that we seem to be prone to. On analysis, these interpretations can be seen to be self-justifying. Granted a prior definition of what the principles of Friends are, the conclusions follow. They arise not from an understanding of what the evidence leads to, but what the evidence can be manipulated to say. Nowadays we have left that sort of thing behind. What I have called the Quaker Studies movement has detached itself from narrow partisanship and forms a solid bond across our continuing divides.

I suggested also that Friends suffered from their neglect of theology. It is often said that Quakerism is a religion of experience and we tend to leave it at that. From the liberal perspective this is a given, but from an evangelical point of view also, Friends belong to the Wesleyan and

not the Reformed tradition, where the emphasis is very clearly about knowing Christ rather than having the correct knowledge about Christ. But properly understood, theology is about the articulation of experience and the recognition of authority. It presents us with the challenges without which neither intellectual nor spiritual growth is possible. In many ways it is this understanding of theology which forms a bridge between the old lecture and the new one. The terms in which theology is done have changed significantly in 20 years and we need to take note of them.

In *Reasons for Hope*, I tried to provide a theology for evangelical Friends which was true to both parts of their heritage. I suppose some of the ideas in that book go back to my earlier Johnson Lecture, but the connection is looser, largely because this book represents a first attempt to come to terms with these newer ideas that have swum into the theological firmament. I guess the committee who invited me to speak was interested in the ending of that book since they suggested I tell you about what the next (unwritten) chapter might say.

The main themes of that book were quite general and concerned the light within and the Holy Spirit, the covenant community and the centrality of Christ. I was concerned to show the ways in which Friends are an integral part of the Christian tradition and, at the same time, the particular contribution to it that they have to make because of the unique insights their tradition has provided them with.

There was no sense of triumphalism about this, as there might have been a century ago — or most certainly would have been in the early formative period — rather, I was trying to make a bigger point, namely that the game is now being played on a different pitch. Since we no longer inhabit a world in which Christianity is the dominant social and intellectual force, the terms of our engagement with the world have irrevocably changed, and the old habits of thought and traditional attitudes will lead us to oblivion if we don't do something about them.

This may be disconcerting at first sight, because we are creatures of habit and are comfortable with the familiar. On the other hand most of us know that change can be beneficial. (I for one am very happy with the present state of medical science and many other things besides.) So this question of survival should not be overly worrying. In a strange way the key to survival in the postmodern world could be the very distinctiveness that has traditionally been a feature of Quaker life. This has to be expressed in contemporary terms, of course, but this means not that we return to an idealized past, but that we think about what is valuable in that past and whether and how it can be applied in the circumstances in which we now live, which is a very different question.

So what is our future and where is our hope? Hope, standing as she does in Scripture between faith and love, is a rather neglected virtue. Actually, all three of the sisters need to be awakened in us before we

can practice and enjoy them. We have faith because of something that happens to us. We discover the power of love when we are loved. Hope comes to us when we have a vision. These things are given to us by the Holy Spirit. They are not of our making.

So hope should not be thought of in purely human terms. It is more than a dream, a fantasy, an as yet unfulfilled desire, a longstanding wish. It is certainly a personal virtue or frame of mind, but it goes beyond this. Hope has an objective reality when what is hoped for is real. It has solid content. In other words, like happiness, it is rational in the strictest sense of the word.

It is also necessarily imprecise. Our hopes for the future are always based on our experience of the past, and we need one explanation for them both because they are one cloth. When I was in the hospital recovering from polio they gave me a small loom and set me to weave a scarf in the Royal Stewart tartan. I remember how the pattern gradually emerged as I pushed the shuttle through time and time again. The past was rolled up at one end of the little loom; the future waited for me to bring it into being at the other.

### **3. JEREMIAH'S TIMES**

What unites past and future is that they are both aspects of one reality. Otherwise our hopes and fears are simply a reflection of our own subjective feelings rather than something greater than ourselves. To understand them, therefore, we need an understanding of that greater reality. We need, in other words, a defensible world-view. I certainly realize that there is more than one way of looking at the world, but that does not mean that different world-views are either interchangeable or equally compelling.

Our text from Jeremiah illustrates this principle. To understand it, to say nothing of trying to apply it to our present situation, either personally or as a branch of the church of Jesus Christ, we are going to have to approach it by means of a world view, an assessment of how God has worked and is working in the world, and what that understanding reveals about our part in his intentions.

As Christians, we do not come to Jeremiah in a neutral frame of mind. He is our spiritual ancestor and we see ourselves as part of the same story he figures in, though at a rather later stage. In other words, there is continuity between his time and ours. If we approach the biblical record in this light, we shall be able to see a number of modern parallels with what was happening then. Obviously, conditions in the seventh century B.C. were very different from ours, but at the same time, if we discern them carefully, there are instructive lessons to be learned.

## ***The End of the Kingdom***

Jeremiah's dates are uncertain. He was born about 645 B.C. into a priestly family, and died, maybe in Egypt, around 60 years of age, maybe in 582. In spite of the imprecision of his own dates he lived through a number of events known well to both archaeologists and biblical scholars that can be dated exactly. We are dealing with an historical character about whom a great deal is known, and from whom we can still learn a great deal. We are thinking of a period of about 40 years, from Richard Nixon's presidency to the present, say.

The prophet grew up at a time when the ancient kingdom of Judah formed what we might call a buffer state between Egypt and whoever happened to be the dominant power in the fertile crescent. Judah was not alone. There were other states in a similar position — the city states of Lebanon, for example, and our old biblical friends Moab, Ammon and Edom.

Jeremiah lived through the testing period in which the Babylonians came to replace Assyria as the dominant superpower. This required careful diplomacy on the part of their client states. Successive kings of Judah, together with the others, sought to retain what independence they could through a combination of defiance, deference, subterfuge and shifting alliances.

So the period was one of geopolitical complexity in which each of these semi-independent states sought to protect its own interests and retain what autonomy it could. How to do it was a matter of political calculation and debate, and a continuing assessment of alternative possibilities. The first priority was national survival.

We should be under no illusions. In Judah, twenty-five hundred years ago, there was a very real fear of annihilation. About a century earlier the Assyrians had destroyed Samaria, annexed the northern kingdom and carried most of its population into permanent exile. The kings knew that, and they knew that their task was to prevent it from happening again. National self-interest in this case required the protection of the institutions of government, justice and religion from any outside forces that would destroy them. In a word, they sought to protect the nation's independence, in exactly the same way we expect our own government to act.

They had to work within the enduring realities of politics, of course. On the debit side we can enter greed, vanity and the desire for power and fame. On the credit side we must not ignore the finer motivations. I am sure there was loyalty to the group or tribe (tribes in this case). People wanted what was best for their families, and there were patriots — those, quite simply, who loved their country.

And there were some real challenges. For a century the nation had been assimilating refugees from the northern kingdom and coping with

the cultural accommodation that became necessary and is now reflected in the text of the Old Testament as we have it. There was land-hunger and inflation, economic processes in which there are both winners and losers. There was no welfare in those days, and indentured or slave labor was widespread — circumstances that gave rise to Isaiah's telling and expressive phrase about grinding the faces of the poor. It was certainly tough.

So we have a situation in which the kings and their advisers were trying to reach a reasoned judgment as to what alliances or changes of alliance would be advantageous, and how internal security could best be maintained. As statesmen they understood that to devise effective policy, one must have a realistic analysis of the situation. One can have sympathy with this outlook. Anything less would have been a dereliction of duty. But the premise they moved from was that of power politics, not the requirements of religion.

### ***The Prophetic Challenge***

The prophets had a very different perspective. They looked at the quality of life within the state as well as the nature of its international obligations, and saw them as two aspects of one reality. To base policy on the need for survival was logically secondary to the question of why survival mattered.

So they looked at the price that was being paid and did not like what they saw. They developed an analysis which said that diplomatic and military reverses were not policy failures but the consequence of faithlessness and disobedience to the divine will.

The reason is that there is a firm connection between religion, politics and the world of ideas. A failure to obey the will of God in civil society has international repercussions. Our lives are all of a piece, and if we do not live in a godly way, there will be consequences.

We should not be too simplistic about this. It is possible to see God arbitrarily deciding the outcome of social movements, battles and political careers to achieve a certain result, but that is rather contrived. A better way of interpreting the times of Jeremiah, or ours for that matter, is to see God influencing the course of history in myriad ways, operating through human motivation and the moral consequences that naturally flow from the decisions we all make, both individually and collectively.

There are things the prophets do not tell us because it is not their job. But the context in which they were writing is significant. To apply their words to our times most effectively, we need to go into the background of what they were saying, because it is at that level that we shall find guidance. There are parallels to be drawn between their times and ours, but we must not be anachronistic about it.

We will not grasp the message of Jeremiah if we rely solely on isolated texts, snippets of information from which we can try to deduce the way to go. My argument is that if we can get a firm grasp of the principles underlying what he was saying, we shall have the analysis we need to understand our contemporary world in the proper way. I want to do this under a number of heads seeing what Jeremiah had to say about his own times, and then trying to bring the analysis up-to-date.

#### **4. JEREMIAH'S CASE**

The prohibition against idolatry ranks high in the Decalogue for very good reason. After the words revealing the divine nature, the very first injunction there is to remember God and not to make human representations of him. Scripture talks about bowing down to graven images, but limiting the prohibition to that is obviously to misunderstand completely what is being said.

##### ***Idolatry***

If one did not know better, one might take the Hopi Kachina cult and the images in a Hindu temple as evidences of idolatry. One would be mistaken, though, without further examination of the circumstances. Neither the masked figures emerging from the khiva or the elephant-headed statue in a temple are actually regarded as divine. They are pointers to the divine. Idolatry lies not in the things themselves but the beliefs it is possible to have about them.

Idolatry works by substituting the imaginary for the real. It is a condition of soul in which we are unable to distinguish our desires from our obligations and look for ways to manipulate circumstances in our favor. By this definition, it is a movement from the realm of truth to the realm of self. We have no protection from our own misjudgment and the misleading advice of others. We tend to make mistakes, to go astray. If we appear before the elephant-headed God with a pure heart, it cannot be an idol. If we believe that our devotions will lead to our own advantage, that is exactly what it will become.

This, of course, is why beliefs matter. Our attitudes to representations of what we believe to be divine things are what constitutes idolatry. I do not wish to suggest that idolatry in this sense is common. I simply want to make the point that we are open to it, and therefore need to be vigilant. Jeremiah himself says, "The heart is deceitful above all things" (Jeremiah 17:9). This sense that we must always seek reality in religion, and practice a deep sense of suspicion towards religiosity, is one of the most enduring legacies of the early Friends.

But not of Jeremiah's contemporaries, in whose times idolatry might be accompanied by human sacrifice. Now I invite you to consider what it was like to live in that kind of world. How, believing in the mercy and love of God, could one begin to comprehend the mind of someone willing to take a human life in a religious ritual? How could one confront such a practice? Jeremiah may sound aggressive and extreme sometimes, but this is part of the reality he was dealing with.

And we need to enter into this world if we are going to make a fist of understanding what Jeremiah is saying. The point about idolatry is that it is the foundation of superstition, which is a whole lot more dangerous. This is what idolatry becomes when it is laced with fear, and at time of change there is plenty to have fear about. Superstition is irrational belief combined with a compulsive devotion to rituals and charms. In the ancient world the way was open to superstitions of all kinds. Star worship and human sacrifice are among the telling examples Jeremiah gives. That is what idolatry leads to.

### ***Gods Many***

Historically, these perversions of belief were not plucked out of thin air. We are moving in this period from the conception of a number of competing tribal gods to a series of tutelary deities responsible for different aspects of human life. We are all familiar with the Graeco-Roman pantheon, but there were parallels in the ancient world. Life, death, birth, fertility, harvest, war, love, wind, storm, sun and moon are easy to objectify. The mystery surrounding them and their arbitrary or inconsistent nature almost requires us to seek to influence them in our own direction. We need to avail ourselves of their power. Rituals enable us to accomplish this.

But there is a problem here. These different influences are not always in harmony. Moreover, when there is an official cult of one supreme and formless deity, how can the individual combine the protection of the two cults simultaneously? One way of reading Jeremiah is to see him engaged in this struggle, saying to people that what they wanted was directly contrary to the second commandment. But his compatriots, motivated by fear, wanted the best of both worlds. Why not introduce the altars of foreign gods into the temple as a form of spiritual insurance?

This is syncretism, the union or reconciliation of separate beliefs or systems. One would normally expect this sort of thing in the religiously diverse cultures of the ancient near east, and the anthropologist in us is not surprised. But Jeremiah was not an anthropologist and traced the social evils of his time to this sort of process. The root cause of the desire to adopt foreign deities was fear and a lack of trust, the direct result of idolatry. And it was unacceptable. In this respect Jeremiah can appear as countercultural to us as he was to his contemporaries.

This needs to be stressed. We read of an ongoing apostasy in the texts that have come down to us from this period. The chosen people desert their God and adopt foreign practices. At the popular level they resort to idols. At a more sophisticated level they hedge their bets because, just maybe, there are other gods whose power is also available and accessible.

The motives will have been mixed, naturally, but the significance and the consequences of what they chose to do are not. They reject the God who brought them out of the Egyptian bondage and gave them the law and the Jerusalem temple. They lose their unique character as they seek to imitate the nations surrounding them. They surrender their unique loyalty to Yahweh. They put their faith in deities that have no existence. In a word, they betrayed God, and in so doing betrayed themselves.

### ***Betrayal***

The Babylonian captivity is presented in Scripture as the natural consequence of the apostasy of the chosen people who betrayed their heritage. What interests me, and has relevance here, is the process by which it happened. One can always look at the period with the eye of a secular historian and find the reason in the political errors of the last four kings, Josiah, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah, but there is a prior question as to how they could come to do the things they did.

The prophetic tradition presents this betrayal in distinctly religious terms, a betrayal of God by the people as a whole. I suppose in the grand scheme of things this is a necessary part of the story because it opens the way to a change of heart on the part of God and the development of two ideas central to Christianity, that God works in obscure ways, through marginalized people whom the world has left behind, and that no matter how great the offence, the love of God is ultimately powerful enough to forgive it.

But what I see is a people who have betrayed themselves, and I would explain my conclusion like this. My reading of the Old Testament to this point is that it is the story of choices, whether it be: to accept the leadership of Moses, to accept the law and reject the golden calf, to have a king, to centralize worship at the temple in Jerusalem — that sort of thing. I know we are looking back from the perspective of later editors, but I don't think that matters too much.

If you asked any reasonably educated contemporary of Jeremiah who he or she was, you would likely get an answer based in the first place on ancestry, the tracing of a tribal line through parents and grandparents and further back. Enquiry into who these folk were would be answered with reference to events, like the earthquake by which Amos dates his prophecy (Amos 1:1). Pressing further, you might get a series of responses that moved into an account of the people to whom your interviewee

belonged, from the Exodus and the settlement of the Promised Land down to the creation of the kingdoms.

At this point you would have arrived at what many commentators nowadays call the “narrative” of the person’s life, the much wider series of events (often of great complexity) which gives meaning and context to the lives of those born within the institutions and the common experience of the specific community possessing the narrative. We are all born and socialized into such communities, and it is this that gives us our identity.

How then, did it come about that people were vulnerable to the neglect and then the rejection of their religious heritage? The answer, I think, lies in the breakdown of their sense of identity. The prophets complain, and we might think they were simply peddling the myth of the golden age, and that there really never was a time when things were different, and God’s will was respected and observed. If that is so, the prophetic message would make no sense, and the Babylonian captivity would have been the Babylonian extinction. In exile, as we shall see, the people rediscovered who they were, and one of the meanings of our text emerges. What they needed was time in which to discover the reality of hope. Without the captivity, they would have had no opportunity to do so.

### ***Injustice***

What then might have been the causes of this weakening of the people’s sense of themselves? I guess they were not much different from other people. Indeed the way we identify with them gives us a significant part of our own self-understanding. The second commandment gives us a clue here. We have already argued that the root of sin lies in putting ourselves in the place of God.

There are many reasons why we might do this. Pride might persuade us that we do not need God. Fear might drive us to look for a spurious protection elsewhere. Greed and other forms of desire might overcome any willingness we might have to be disciplined or constrained. Sloth might persuade us that it is too much trouble to do our duty. Anger or envy might consume us in a sense of hurt and resentment to the exclusion of other people’s rights or interests.

We see here what can happen to the soul when self-interest predominates over devotion to God or to the interests of others. Almost by definition we are describing the weakening or absence of love and a breakdown of trust. We can see too, how this condition manifests itself. History and literature are full of the themes of human self-destruction through the desire for greed and power.

And this seems to have been the course taken by the people of God as they lost sight of their calling in the later years of the monarchy. We have already noted the social conditions of the time. The ancient

economy was neither controlled nor planned. There was no provision for social welfare. There were extremes of wealth and poverty. The presence of refugees depressed wage rates. Subsistence farmers were vulnerable to drought, locusts and other natural disasters. Taxes were high to pay tributes and subventions to foreign powers. The legal system served the interests of the powerful and the well-off.

This was not justice. Society was not run in the interests of the weak and vulnerable, yet the prophets insisted that the will of God was that it should be. Here we see the contrast between the identity to which God was calling his people, and the identity which they chose for themselves when they proved too weak or too selfish to heed their calling. They were seduced by self-interest.

At a deep level the older loyalty remained, as the captivity was to show. The possibility endured that the people would eventually come to understand how they had gone wrong, as the prophets continually held out to them the possibility of reconciliation with God. In these circumstances an idea developed that would be adopted and used powerfully by the nascent Quaker movement millennia hence. It was simply that it was possible for many people to hold the form of religion while forgetting its substance, to perform the ritual with the body but to fail to rectify injustice with the heart. In the end this process reached its logical conclusion. The temple was destroyed and the captivity in Babylon began.

## **5. A MODERN JEREMIAD**

I want now to make an abrupt turn away from the ancient world and look at how we live today, bearing some of these things in mind. I have already noted that one can't simply look for parallels between ancient and modern times as if one could look at a text or a passage, work out the message and then apply it to one's own circumstances. However, I think that idolatry is alive and well, and informing contemporary culture in significant ways, seeking refuge from the eternal in that which is not eternal.

I should say that I am going to be talking quite a bit about "our" culture and way of life and what I mean by that is, very loosely, the United States, the United Kingdom and the other Great Britain countries which between them generate well over half the world's wealth and intellectually tend to take their lead from what happens in America.

These societies have developed characteristic ways of describing themselves and providing explanations about a variety of social phenomena. Let me say that in spite of what I am about to say, I think that within these societies lies the best hope for the future of mankind.

I no more accept all of their values than Jeremiah did those of his contemporaries — indeed I think many are dangerous, if not toxic. But within them, as among the exiles of ancient Israel, lies the seed of the future and a greater vision of God's will for the world. The Society of Friends is a part of this whole process and its future; its hope and its vision will be intimately related to what happens on this larger stage.

### ***The Flight from Responsibility***

The first refuge from the eternal which we nowadays seek out is to provide explanations of social reality which absolve us from personal responsibility for it. In *West Side Story* there is a scene in which gang members tease a policeman, explaining that they are not really responsible for their actions because they have got the social disease. This was funny then because it took a defensible position to an indefensible extreme. Of course there are powerful social dynamics that produce undesirable consequences, like family breakdown and gang culture. They need to be understood. But such dynamics are not an absolute explanation of our situation.

To think that they are invites trouble. Regardless of who commits them, we deem certain actions to be crimes because we are required to by our sense of justice. The moral sense reaches the conclusion that theft and murder are impermissible because they are wrong, and society has every right to punish the people who commit them. But equity recognizes that not every crime is of equal importance. There may be aggravating or mitigating circumstances that we have to take into account. This, of course, is one of the marks of a civilized society.

What it does not mean, however, is that those who break the law bear no responsibility for their actions, and that the law should take account of aggravating or mitigating circumstances before it is formulated. We do not define degrees of murder in terms of the social profile of those likely to do it. We begin with the moral principles that transcend circumstances in the act of drafting a penal code. At least, that is what we should do. It seems, however, that I cannot pick up a newspaper nowadays without the refrain of *Gee Officer Krupke* ringing in my ears.

It seems to me therefore, as an ordinary citizen, that we are beginning to redefine humanity in the consequences, not in recognizing the substantive offence. To understand is to forgive, as the French proverb quite rightly says, but this principle does not affect my argument in any way. I am concerned to point out what I see as a trend in contemporary social life that is objectionable on grounds of Christian principle.

We can recognize the moral defects in human life and make the allowances for them as we are bound to do. But we must be clear at the same time that we do not take away the sense that we are imperfect beings and one of our defining features is that we are ultimately free. To

do otherwise is to close the gap between the ultimate mystery of human life and a mechanistic explanation of it. Because we take social factors into account in assessing what we do, we are not obliged to go further and adopt a mechanistic view of human nature.

Herein lays the modern equivalent of the idolatry against which Jeremiah prophesied. It is in the gap between what we are and what it is open to us to become, that we find God. Contemporary society has many ways of filling that gap from its own resources, and many motives for so doing. But one of them is cultural. To preserve the distinction is to place a limit on our own wishes and sense of self-importance. It is to be humble before God. To do the opposite is the essence of idolatry. It means we have adopted a different vision.

### ***An Answer for Everything***

I also discern in contemporary life a disinclination to accept that there are any limits to human understanding, that there are no mysteries that we will not, ultimately, be able to unravel. In the sciences, I can live with that attitude, because there, it is the evidence that counts and we know that when we see it. My tolerance does not extend to social affairs, however. Theories that answer all our questions about ourselves are very dangerous. Karl Popper pointed out many years ago that the greatest enemy of an open society is what he called “reinforced dogmatism,” namely, a theory that carries within itself an absolute answer to any objection that can be made to it.

If you have ever heard anyone use the phrase, “false consciousness” you will have touched on this principle in operation. If a certain theory provides an explanation for human relationships, political or economic, and seems so powerful that nobody could reasonably reject it, then some explanation is called for as to why there are people who don’t.

Obviously, within terms of the theory such people are being unreasonable. Since nobody is knowingly unreasonable, dissenters either have some ulterior motive or fail properly to understand what is being said. False consciousness needs to be corrected, or failing that, eradicated, for the common good.

The 20th century gave rise to a number of ideologies which offered total explanations of human life and sought to coerce many millions of people into conformity. The results we know. We do not use the language of idolatry and retribution any more, but I reckon that Jeremiah would have no difficulty in putting Lenin, Hitler, Pol Pot and Mao Zedong in the right category. Once we begin to lose sight of God, or forget our dependence on divine providence, we almost instinctively seek other things that will fulfil our need for order and meaning. If there is nothing beyond ourselves, we have to find these things from within our own resources.

These resources are not neutral, though. Under God's guidance they can be beneficial, but unaided they carry great risks. Modern history provides plenty of examples of people so convinced of their own rightness that they sought the power to influence the lives of millions, and ended up bringing death to millions for the greater good of all. Idolatry is a seductive process which draws people ever deeper into its influence. Their theories were their idols.

This is a dramatic way to put the point, I have to admit, but there is a point here, nevertheless. Religious bodies which rate faith highly tend to have difficulty with doubt, and if we go back in history we can find the Christian church engaged in similar evils to those perpetrated by secular ideologies in modern times. The causes and effects are the same, because in both cases there are human beings unwilling to recognize their own limitations. They fail always, because nobody has an answer for everything.

A sense of our own limitations, therefore, is one of our strongest safeguards against losing a sense of divine presence and the obligations this entails. This is a spiritual condition which is made up of many things, among which humility and faithfulness are particularly important. Strangely, the Babylonian captivity works as an illustration of this principle. As the people discovered humility and faithfulness, so they discovered a hope and a future.

## **6. KEEPING THE FAITH**

We do Jeremiah less than justice, then, if we see him simply as a prophet of doom. He also brought the captives a message from a loving and forgiving God, full of glory and holiness. The experiences in store in Babylon were in a strange sense inevitable and necessary. Through tragedy came renewal, out of captivity the experience of grace, prefiguring the deepest streams of later Christian spirituality. I want now to change tack yet again and think about the nature of the God who does these things.

### ***Times and Seasons***

I suppose I start with the season. It gets dark early in England and the weather is unpredictable and usually glorious. We have had some rainy days but more have been windswept with broken cloud, and unpredictable showers. The day is actually very short and the evening begins to close in at about four o'clock. At this time of the year there is a text that keeps on repeating itself in my mind, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light..."

At this time the stars are also seasonally bright, and I always find God's glory in them. I saw an article in the paper a few months ago

with a photo from the Hubble telescope of a galaxy 14 million light years away, formed nearer the origins of the universe than ourselves. I think about this a lot. I can only dream about what it means because the consequences of such knowledge are immense, and part of my understanding about the glory of God. My faith tells me it is the creation of the same God that I am reading about in Jeremiah. Now what these two images have in common is that they are bound up with the passage of time. The insights of Jeremiah and of Edwin Hubble do not belong to different universes; they are both about the here and now.

These words, “hope” and “future” operate in various ways. They are in the first place reassuring, as we can see immediately by looking at their opposites. What would a life be without hope? I am at that interesting stage in which I am learning about — I won’t say, getting, old — but perhaps, advancing years. The rewards are many, as are the drawbacks, like physical incapacity. But the most interesting part of the process is to come to terms with my own death. No longer are my best years in front of me, they passed by years ago. What I have to look forward to now is continuing physical and mental decline.

So in the world’s terms, I haven’t got much of a future. But happily I do not think in the world’s terms. I am finding out with increasing conviction one of the truths of faith, which is that we are ready for certain thoughts at certain times in our lives, and to try to anticipate them means confusion.

I think this is a good subsidiary reason for Friends’ suspicion of creeds. Requiring a fixed statement of what people *must* believe requires faith to be fixed in stone. In fact, the way we hold our beliefs is as significant as the fact that we hold them. I have always been prepared to accept particular items of Christian belief simply because they were that, and I wanted to belong to the church and be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, at various times I have found certain things very hard to understand, and other things very hard to agree with. Being given freedom among Friends, I have been able to come through to a deeper faith.

I tell you now that for many years I found miracles almost impossible to understand or to accept. I tried to cope with them figuratively, metaphorically, symbolically, all kinds of ways until I found a simple acceptance that the stories meant what they said. At any particular time, if my life had depended on acceptance of some predefined belief about them, I would have been sunk. Or excommunicated. Or burned.

The same thing is true of more serious matters. Properly understood, the doctrines of the church are mysteries, only understood by faith. You don’t need me to tell you what faith is, but it is important for my argument to register the depth which that word signifies. We will never know in this life the height and breadth of Christ’s love for us, so the

mysteries of the incarnation and atonement are rather to be experienced and explored than to be believed. Belief is the least of it. Belief relates to a thing, faith relates to a person.

So this Advent, as I think about hope, and ask myself what hope I have, I look to the second coming. This is one of those doctrines I could never make much sense of, not being a dispensationalist or greatly concerned with the rapture. I remember I talked about it at the North Carolina Pastors' Conference once, but heaven knows what I said or what they made of me. But I am coming to see the significance of the return of Christ.

So much is involved, chiefly the unity of the human race. Matthew's image is of all the nations of the world being assembled together. If we believe that he has made the nations of one blood, that has to go beyond a biological assessment of our relations with one another. On that basis, human solidarity is rather more than an abstraction but something we are all in together.

Moreover, our understanding of time is too linear. How do we share our common humanity with the dead? The vision of the end of time which our faith holds out to us is based on presence, not memory, reality not remembrance. Sitting here in the soft twilight of an early December evening, reflecting on the words of Jeremiah, my thoughts are inescapably drawn to the end of time. My time.

Where then is my hope? I guess what I will be is a result of what I have been. Some people think habits are undesirable. Well, they may be, and we all have certain bad habits we don't recognize or talk about openly. That is not what I mean. Habits in the spiritual life can be overwhelmingly beneficial because they actually work in the same way as liturgy, giving shape and meaning to what we do. Grace before meals, for example, carries us forward as physical beings and also as spiritual beings acknowledging and expressing our gratitude to the source of all life.

### ***Hidden Guidance***

I have had my tribulations in life, as we all have, but I have to say that underlying everything that has happened to me, I have discerned a beneficial purpose. The natural world develops, it seems, as it should do, according to laws, perhaps principles, of which we now understand a great deal. The spiritual world also appears to move rationally and calmly in the direction it has been given. I seem to have been guided in a way that even now I barely understand. What understanding I have been given is partial, but it is explicable by many things of which I have no definite knowledge, but whose existence is guaranteed to me by the faith I have and that has so far proved perfectly trustworthy. At any rate, I am quite content with it.

So whether I am in one of the apparent upswings in life, or one of the downswings, that trust remains. This is why I love the 23rd Psalm. It affirms that even in the valley of the shadow of death, which I am about to enter, there is hope. The words of Jeremiah to the captives express the same trust. So I stand where I do and my hope is in the word made flesh. In contemplating my own declining powers, and the fact that my death is much nearer than my birth, my emotions are insufficient to sustain me, as is what capacity for insight I may possess.

What I need primarily is reassurance, both as to my past, the life I have led, or tried to lead, and to what lies beyond the few years that remain to me. Now the comfort I have from my faith lies certainly in my experience of the inward and immediate guidance of God, the light within as it is properly called.

But the light is the light because it has an object, it shows me things, not just instantaneous judgments about the world but also the significance of what happens over time. Quite obviously this is what ties me in to the story of which Jeremiah is a part, what we might call salvation history, the unfolding of God's purpose as recorded in Scripture and lived out in the company of his people.

Now the hope which was offered to the captives was not an immediate one. It was neither impulsive nor arbitrary, for the God of Jeremiah was not a despot. Those who received it knew the divine character because it had been the subject of their religious reflection over centuries of experience, adverse or auspicious. They could accept the gift of hope because they knew the history out of which it came. So it is with me, and so it must be if we begin to apply these things to the future of the Religious Society of Friends.

Hope is coupled with a future. Actually, this phrase comes close to being a truism. Whoever had a hope without a future? The one is a precondition of the other. I have been taking my own circumstances as a guide to these words because they are appropriate. At my age, my worldly hopes cannot be personal. They lie in what is to become of my children and grandchildren, and my wishes for the world in which they and their descendants will live long after we are all gone. No, what personal hope is left to me is entirely in the spiritual world. It is given substance by the promise of eternal life.

I am sure that the captives to whom Jeremiah brought the divine message understood these things well. They knew that devotion was not an antidote to adversity, and we know that they bitterly lamented what had happened to them. I don't know how many of us would be able to withstand that kind of political disaster, and I am sure many did not. But the righteous remnant did, and through them came the ultimate restoration in the time of Cyrus the Great.

The things I have just said fall between a number of stools. They are not strictly speaking history or biblical criticism, but represent my own reflections about how things must have been, taking the circumstances of my own time as a guide, without according it a privileged status. Underlying what I have said is an approach to captivity, its circumstances and nature, because the text, “I give you a hope and a future...” are addressed to people who, in the world’s terms, had no hope and no future. So what can all this say to us?

## 7. MORAL EDUCATION

There was a historical inevitability about the Babylonian captivity, both in worldly political terms and also in terms of God’s will. This is a difficult thought for many of us, I fear, because the nice pleasant God we know would never condemn us to that kind of fate. We are not like our Old Testament ancestors. We would never be as disobedient as them and certainly do not merit God’s censure. Or so we think. We are so used to the idea that God wants what we want, that it is inconceivable that we might learn something very important from a period of captivity, whether that be real or metaphorical.

I have to say that I have never been in prison, either because I have broken the law or because I wanted to make a point of principle. So what I am going to say now is a generalization about what seems to me to be the case rather than something based on personal experience. I have reflected on captivity from time to time, because our religious Society has historical experience of it, and if I want to try to enter sympathetically into the early Quaker experience, that is something I need to do. Moreover, one of the most important figures in my life is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose masterpiece, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, reflects just this experience.

We can define captivity as confinement in a place against our will. Prison is such a place, of course, but the Babylonian captivity was not like that. The exiles had considerable freedom, and there was nothing like the harsh treatment they might have expected from the Assyrians at an earlier period. Our text for this Triennial comes from a letter sent by Jeremiah to the exiles in which he advises them to make the best of their situation, to:

“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it,

because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have.” (Jeremiah 29:5-7)

For the moment let us think about the first part of this passage. It looks like advice to make the best of a bad job, but is actually recommending that people attempt to live as near normal lives as they can, constructive and also benevolent. The tone is in marked contrast to the vehement denunciations of the pre-exilic community that we get elsewhere in Jeremiah. This, the text seems to be saying, is the condition of the promise. “Do this and you will live,” so to speak. We need to look at these conditions because we cannot just pluck “hope” and “future” out of thin air and hope that this is what God has in store for us.

### ***Right Ordering***

I guess that physical confinement has moral consequences, of which the most significant is that the prisoner or exile becomes psychologically as well as physically dependent on his captors. This dependence is not automatic, however, but is to a considerable degree within the power of the captive to accept or reject. One can acquiesce in one’s status, or one can resist. Or one can seek some kind of *modus vivendi*, which is what seems to have happened in the case of the exiles. We therefore need to qualify our understanding of the nature of captivity.

The verse that we have taken for the Triennial theme offers one way of dealing with the status of captive. What God offered was hope and the exiles had a choice between maintaining the hope of ultimate return or surrendering that hope. The price was significant. The abandonment of the hope of return involved a rejection of the covenants, the law, the history, in a word the identity of the people. What we hope for determines who we are.

So I guess the first point of significance I would make about the experience of captivity or exile (and I spent 10 years as a voluntary exile in this country) is that one acquires a strong sense of boundaries between the permissible and impermissible, the area of limited freedom one possesses, and where its boundaries are. To survive, one must necessarily develop a sense of selfhood — if there is hope, who it is who is hoping, what it is that is hoped for. The experience therefore poses questions of your identity which it is imperative to answer if you do not wish to take the path of acquiescence.

The classic modern example of someone who preserved his integrity against all the odds in the Soviet gulag is Alexander Solzhenitsyn. If you haven’t read *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*, go and do so now. A Christian who went through almost the same experience and has left a very similar account is the Russian Orthodox priest and icon expert

Father Piotr Arseny. What each of these men describes is the manner in which a condition of almost total subjection produces a conviction of total freedom since they come to the realization that their soul is inviolable and uncontrollable, so that, though they may ultimately die, the system can never win. These are extreme cases, but that only serves to make the point emphatically.

There is, of course, the violent response to captivity, and this was the option faced and taken by many people in Europe during the German occupation, notably in Poland and France. I remember as a child hearing stories of the Maquis and other heroes of the resistance, many of whom ended their days in the concentration camps. This, I think is the mirror image of the Solzhenitsyns and the Arsenys. The endurance and iron will is the same, and this kind of resistance, evidenced well in Scripture as it happens, is also a part of the picture we should not allow our Quaker scruples to ignore. It is a legitimate function of the captive to inspire fear in the captor whenever possible.

### ***Babylon Today***

What the non-resisters and the resisters have in common is significant, though one group lacks the options available to the others and that is a willingness to submerge self-interest, or indeed one's life, for a greater good, that of the larger community. I guess the word for that is sacrifice, and what we see here, paradoxically, is that self-sacrifice is an expression of hope. Jeremiah's letter offers hope, but that hope is extended to the people. It may not be realized by specific people within the group, but they are a part of the hope nevertheless.

So let us take our text and some of these features of what happens in exile and captivity and apply them to our present circumstances. You will remember I said I wanted to look at captivity metaphorically as a condition of external compulsion and internal restraint, and to look at how those two things affect who we are and what in modern circumstances we think our options are. History deals us a certain kind of hand and we have to play it. We don't start from scratch. We do not have a clean slate. Our options are limited by circumstances. So as we begin to think about our future as a religious group, let us look at the stage we are entering on.

To do this, I want to draw an analogy. In the book of Revelation, "Babylon" is used as a symbol of human wickedness, specifically the earthly power of the Roman Empire brought to bear against the church with great cruelty. At the Reformation many people began to turn this image against the papacy itself, some applying it to the Roman Catholic Church specifically, others, like the Anabaptists, and later, Friends, to what was seen as an organically apostate church, including the Protestant, which balked at the reforms that were ultimately necessary.

For purposes of my analogy, I shall ignore the whole apocalyptic superstructure that rests on these ideas. What concerns me is the notion that somehow our range of choices is limited by influences and powers beyond ourselves. The idea of Babylon involves compulsion, of course, but I have in mind a milder kind of limitation, that which comes through all kinds of subtle influences, and inescapable realities that limit our freedom of choice, that captivate us, by no means with malicious intent.

Anybody seeking to bring the gospel to others must do what Paul did — work within the conscious and unconscious assumptions of the time. But first it is necessary to know what the significant ones are. This is my take.

## **8. WHAT WE TAKE FOR GRANTED**

First, I think that wherever we turn we face the reality of technological change. There is a temptation to think that is an unmixed blessing, since it fits neatly with the idea that, in spite of the setbacks, the course of human history is one of progress towards a much better future. This idea is very appealing, of course, but is not, to me, entirely obvious.

### ***Progress***

I have to confess I approve of the modern supermarket. There is a lot of snobbery among right thinking people about the rednecks who are too fat or spotty or eat the wrong kind of things or don't think of what impact their habits have, and stores that advertise and encourage their harmful habits with coupons and loss leaders and things of that sort. What people like that they will not face is that supermarkets provide goods that the poor can afford and otherwise would not get. I hate very few things in this world, but one of the things that riles me beyond measure is the superiority of those on very comfortable incomes who sneer at the preferences of those whom they never mix with except to counsel, teach, cure or order about.

But that is beside the point. The very success of the modern capitalist economy is also its undoing. The price of prosperity, at any rate up to now, has been environmental degradation. I do not really see how mass prosperity can be squared with the desire for a habitable planet. It is thought that birth rates fall as living standards rise and that world population will level off about mid-century, but I am not convinced. There is a real problem here, maybe the greatest we have ever faced.

The command over our physical environment created by our own ingenuity brings with it profound moral problems. (Not that the preservation of the environment is not a moral question; of course it is.) Our intelligence seems to be a two-edged sword. Every day I scan the

papers in search of news of a scientific breakthrough which will save my sister from Parkinson's disease.

But what might the quest for such a cure involve? Stem cell research? Whose stem cells? When we get into that kind of thing all sorts of things become theoretically possible. If we can isolate and eradicate genetic disorders, we can create designer babies. You can't have the one technology without the other. I look at the possibilities of genetic engineering with horror. But at the same time I want my sister to be cured. There is a real problem here, but I have no answer to it.

### ***Information Overload***

Second, I am dimly aware of having lived through one of the most momentous changes in human history. The journalist in me wants to compare it with the neolithic farming revolution, but I suppose that is a flight of fancy. Nevertheless, in my lifetime the majority of the world's population has come to be found in cities and not villages. Increasingly people are literate and have access to modern means of communication like radio, television and the Internet. No more are great barbarities committed in the dark. CNN is there to bring them to us.

These are circumstances of extreme importance. In practice it means that national and cultural barriers are increasingly porous. It means that the flow of information in the world is almost uninhibited and increasingly, if not entirely, impossible to control. These are welcome developments. Information is said to be power, and if that is the case, power is being diffused much more widely. I now read blogs, and until I started doing that I did not quite realize the extent to which the mainstream media were, and to a considerable extent remain, the gatekeepers of the information superhighway. But that situation is changing rapidly. The information world is increasingly democratic.

If you have ever considered the difference between opinion and knowledge, you may have been disconcerted to realize that there is no formal difference between them. Knowledge is simply an opinion that is in accordance with the facts, and is entirely beyond your own control. Opinion, in other words, needs external validation before it can become knowledge. The trouble with the new information superhighway is that along it, it is sometimes very hard to distinguish where truth lies.

For example, if you want to inform yourself on any particularly contentious matter and you look elsewhere than books, there is a problem. Certainly books are written to make cases and prove points, but they are subject to publishers' and readers' review, peer review or the critical gamut of the press if they are any good. When your teenager goes online to research a topic for homework, there is no such process in operation. It is not just a question of accuracy but proportion.

I doubt if I am the only one to notice that it is a fact of our culture

that the distinction between fact and fantasy, reality and illusion, is increasingly difficult to maintain, and that sometimes the values of the visual media are closer to entertainment than to news and public information.

I think this is a serious matter. The continuing, decades-long debate over major political issues that is probably necessary for hearts and minds to be really changed may be in danger in the age of the sound bite. The price of modern media of communication is that we have less and less worth communicating and our culture may be permanently impoverished. At any rate, in the absence of a generally accepted narrative, there seems to be increasing difficulty in finding a common basis for social and political life.

### ***Unexamined Assumptions***

Last, I want to notice three things, apparently unrelated, which seem to exercise a significant influence on public discourse at a foundational level. Much of what is said in private conversation and discussion on radio, television and other media of communication seems to rest on these assumptions. Because they are usually unacknowledged and assumed, they are seldom released from their caves into the light of public scrutiny. But they lurk there, and their names are specialism, scientism and relativism. Let me say something about each, not necessarily in any kind of order.

Obviously there is an order in our experience of the world, and things don't just happen — though there also seems to be an area of chance in the universe. What I mean is that human and social events are often very complex, and are capable of analysis and interpretation from the standpoint of a number of different disciplines. That's the way it is, and I am grateful for the results. I am actually a specialist myself and I can appreciate the benefits of specialist contributions to our general knowledge. But on the other hand, there is truth in the old saying about an expert being someone who knows more and more about less and less.

Part of us is programmed, it seems, to make generalizations about our experience, and often we reach conclusions that go beyond the data, simply because the data seem insufficient to explain what we know by gut instinct. I think this latter kind of knowledge is what we call wisdom, and to place absolute trust in part of the story rather than the whole is a recipe for disaster. But we become reluctant to generalize, and fail to exercise wisdom by feeling that somehow we don't have the right to speak because we lack the relevant specialist understanding. Thus we place obstacles in the way of wisdom.

Underlying this process are our other two beasts. I tend to think that the reason we give such weight to specialist opinion is that we think it is more secure and therefore more trustworthy since it is factual,

experiential and, in a word, scientific, using that word not in its more restricted sense, but to signify conclusions reached with the appropriate academic rigor. We rightly apply these standards in ordinary life, but tend to overlook the occasions when we take them beyond their proper sphere. Since science can tell us so much about the world, we tend to think that it can tell us *everything* about the world, and that there is no part of human experience that is not open to its scrutiny.

I am not a creationist, and I believe that some variant of evolutionary theory is the best explanation of how we got here. But there are certain questions which go beyond the data of biology and palaeontology, about which they can, of necessity, have nothing to say. It makes sense to ask why the universe came into being, but the answer that is required goes beyond science since there is no branch of science which is appropriate to that enquiry.

The reason is simple. It is a commonplace that often the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. It is perfectly legitimate for us to answer questions about the totality of our experience of the cosmos without scientific whistleblowers telling us we can't. (And for the record, I have no problem with the possibility of multiple universes. My quarrel is solely with scientism, the idea that everything can be explained by science.)

The attitude I have been questioning here leads almost inevitably to my third beast, relativism. One of the principles of the scientific mode of explanation is that it seeks at all times to exclude personal bias, recognizing the danger of that aspect of original sin by which we try to see the world as we want it to be rather than the way it is. You couldn't find a clearer or better moral principle, and I try to observe it to the very best of my ability. However, when we get to some of these transcendent questions, and we try to carry forward mundane principles, we find we have no guide as to how to make up our minds.

What are we to say, for example, when it is suggested (as it recently has been) that the production of cross-species clones could be produced in the laboratory to aid medical research? We are really on the verge of being able to create the mythical beasts of the classical imagination, like centaurs, satyrs and other creatures. I am inviting you to undertake a thought experiment, but it has a point. Suppose we really could produce a centaur — half man and half horse — what would stop us?

We would need, of course, a moral principle that could be enforced by common consent and the force of law. But who is to decide? Who has the authority to arbitrate? By what right does one group of people impose their will over another? This is a practical question of increasing importance in our culture and in which the religious community has a vital concern.

One thing we can say is that relativism provides no answer whatsoever. In the face of our increasingly sophisticated powers we are being faced by

moral questions that many feel unequipped to deal with, and it is certain that an urgent reappraisal of public morality is required. The second half of my lecture will be devoted to how Friends in particular can respond to these challenges and to enquire what we can put into the public debate. The question is, is it enough to say, "Because we can, we may?"

## 9. MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY

There is a significant religious dimension to a great deal of contemporary public life, at the cultural level as much as the purely political. (Indeed, I think the two are often confused and why politicians fail when they approach cultural questions with political solutions.) These questions are far more important than the parochial controversies of particular Christian denominations, even ours. These cultural questions form the boundaries within which we have to think. They set the ultimate agenda.

In discussing captivity, I spoke about external and internal constraints. Here I am talking about the external and internal circumstances which we cannot avoid unless we are to retreat, as we once did, into isolation from the contaminations of the world, both moral and intellectual. So let us look at the landscape in which we find ourselves and which we are actually a part of.

### *The Secularist Offensive*

If somebody asked me what I thought was the most important problem facing Britain and the USA, I would have no hesitation in answering that it is the conflict between religion and secularism. I happen to think that Friends have things to say that the world needs to hear, but at the same time I know that before people can respond to our message, they have to understand it. That means that we have to be able to engage people's minds by talking in terms that they understand, using both vocabulary and concepts that make sense. We will not be able to secure agreement until we achieve understanding.

This is the primary battleground, in my opinion, and we neglect our duty and our best interests if we do not get seriously engaged in it. It is hard to see that this matters if one has little conception of the atmosphere in which public opinion forms and reforms, absorbing and reflecting influences and produces what is known as the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times, the intellectual atmosphere in which we live.

And the spirit of our times is a secular one which is becoming hostile to, not simply tolerant of, religion. You will probably be familiar with the titles of Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great*. These are bestsellers and the ideas in them are increasingly popular.

Bestsellers set the topics of conversation in influential and opinion-forming circles. That is why they are bestsellers. If they are good, and these books *are* good, they set a standard, and it becomes very difficult to argue against them. They are quoted and acquire a reputation. They become, in a word, opinion formers, and rather than needing to be argued, their conclusions become assumptions, and thus the climate of public opinion is changed. In the long run, such developments determine what is thought about and also, to a considerable degree, what is then thought.

This process, which I believe to be under way, is rather different from the sociologists' process of secularization. That is the thesis that with advancing technology and changing social patterns, the world of human experience can largely be explained without recourse to the supernatural. Here we encounter the significant difference that exists between religion regarded as a phenomenon and religion as personal commitment. The recent flood of books on the arguments for the existence of God marks a sea change in public interest. Those of us on the religious side of the argument are being faced with a serious challenge which we ignore at our peril.

Already, it is possible to discern a number of disparate and commonly held attitudes which make contemporary secularism comprehensive and attractive. If you think about the parable of the sower for a moment, part of its meaning comes from the nature of the ground on which the seed falls. Some is inhospitable, some enthusiastic but shallow, some very welcoming. What, in other words, are the conditions under which it becomes difficult to entertain the idea of God?

### ***Soul and Self***

At the head of such a list, I suppose, is the weakening of the idea that the human being possesses a soul. I don't want to go into this in detail but what I have in mind is this. In the 20th century the workings of the mind were revealed in a quite unprecedented way. Before that time we relied perhaps on literature, philosophy or our own inherent wisdom to interpret the behaviour of others. Now we can do so scientifically, I would say to our great benefit.

But on the other hand, the very power of our intellects to do this gives rise to the idea that our understanding of the operations of the mind also enables us to answer the traditional questions about its nature and significance. But this takes us beyond the specific into questions of the origin, value and purposes of our lives, what makes us human, in effect. The one set of assumptions does not lead to the other, and this is the misstep I think our culture takes.

One can see the same thing at work in the debate over intelligent design. (I should identify myself immediately as a believer in both the

evolutionary synthesis and the creation of the universe by a loving God.) The problem arises when people — usually journalists — come to the controversy for the first time and present it in terms of fundamentalism verses progressivism. Though this is a bad mischaracterization, one can understand why it is made.

Biblical literalists are unable to comprehend that God has the power to order the universe in such a manner that it develops under its own internal dynamic, (what the Bible calls the *logos*), where secularists are unable to accept that the very processes they observe raise fundamental questions that go beyond the scope of particular scientific disciplines. There is a cultural bias towards maintaining this opposition and not seeking to discover a synthesis.

I guess that what underlies this is this unravelling of the certainties of the enlightenment. We use that word, you remember, to indicate a range of attitudes that perhaps reached their peak in the late 18th century, which have shaped our world, notably by using reason and then science (not the same thing) as the primary way to interpret human experience, often called modernism. The benefits of this approach have been incalculable in all departments of life.

But there are also drawbacks and this is what has given rise to post-modernism, the idea that reason can be stretched beyond its natural limits, that the data required for accurate generalizations, at any rate in the humanities, are inaccessible, because what counts as knowledge is not some neutral philosophical principle, but the outcome of cultural conflicts in which the interests of dominant groups determine reality, rather than some abstract standard of reason.

### ***What is at Stake***

You can see where this leads. If there is no generally accepted standard for the adjudication of disputes based on principles that transcend special interests, the whole conception of one overarching truth is called into question.

This is a serious problem in practical terms. The American Republic is a rationally conceived political entity which has hitherto relied on an unspoken moral consensus for its operation. But if, as seems to be the case, that consensus is collapsing, or at any rate weakening significantly, can the political structure survive without the consensus? This is precisely why the “culture wars” are so significant.

The other dimension of all this, and I think the consequence of it, is that it provides support for moral relativism. I can quite understand the viewpoint that says that our moral standards in fact simply reflect the consensus of the group we belong to, and should be observed for that reason. A lot of harmonious social life depends on this way of doing things, and I have no quarrel with it. But without the sheer anchor of

some sort of principle, moral relativism can easily slide to an acceptance of things that should not be accepted on the basis that everybody is entitled to their opinion. If morality is basically about power, there is no answer to barbarism.

So there are big stakes in the cultural game, and the Society of Friends is, as it has always been, inextricably involved in it. Much of the controversy is the continuation of the battles of the past, which in fact reveal the possibilities that are always open to us. Atheism has a respectable pedigree, and seems to be a permanent feature of measured reflection on our place in the order of things. But till now, I suspect, it has not had the backing of a widely held series of assumptions about who we are.

My assessment is that we are now in the situation in which (a) atheism may well be the culturally-dominant opinion, and (b) public discourse is based on atheistic rather than theistic assumptions, so that belief becomes the concern of a minority and there is no access to religious concepts in public discourse. Thus, religious understanding becomes increasingly marginalized, and that, by definition, includes the Quaker version of it.

### ***The Moral***

That is why I have taken the dimension of captivity so seriously here, in drawing out what Jeremiah's prophecy involves. As I have already said, it is no good finding a nice quotation as a theme for our conference if we are not to take it seriously. Jeremiah was not over-fond of the prophets who told people what they wanted to hear, and we are not taking him seriously if we act — or think — in the same way that they did.

The Babylonian captivity was not in itself onerous, as the prophecy implies, and people lived fairly comfortably within it. But the basic rules of life were made by somebody else, and the exiles found that certain cultural imperatives faced them, of which the greatest was accommodation to political reality.

They were in captivity because of a set of historical circumstances that were rooted in longer sequences of events from which they derived a sense of their own identity. They possessed a narrative which rehearsed the great events of their past and contained reasons for their present predicament. It also contained pointers to the way ahead, to settle permanently or preserve the dream of a restoration to their own country. This was their choice — to look to their roots or to lose their identity. I think that this is where we are now.

So in thinking about the future of Friends, we have to go in two directions. First, we have to think about what it means to be a Friend in the 21st century against the background of contemporary American religion, and realize that the general challenge Christianity faces is a challenge to us too. Then there is the wider question of how we assess

our situation against a radically different world picture. In the '60s and '70s the eastern faiths, varieties of Buddhism and the Hindu way of life, were very attractive to the boomer generation. There is now a very different challenge, the confident and rapid expansion of world Islam.

I have suggested figuratively that being defined in somebody else's terms is a form of captivity. To share a religious faith or heritage with others is not of itself evidence of this. But we do need to be alert for the occasions when we should be true to conviction that we also have something unique to say, which the world needs to hear. We only place ourselves in a Babylonian captivity if we choose to do so.

We need, therefore, to look for the hope and the future that God may have in store for us. I don't look for the dramatic; I don't foresee a latter day George Fox sweeping through the cities of the western world gathering another great people. What I hear, however, is the sound of one of the essential voices in the choir that sings the good news of God's love and promise of redemption.

## 10. THE PERSONAL APPEAL OF QUAKERISM

Let me begin my more specific comments about Friends with a little personal history. Autobiography is a risky business, but it actually lies at the heart of the testimony that many of us are prepared to give, should the opportunity arise. That sort of autobiography was clearly understood by George Fox who began his *Journal* with the words, "That all may know the dealings of the Lord with me, and the various exercises, trials, and troubles through which he led me...and may thereby be drawn to admire and glorify his infinite wisdom and goodness..."<sup>3</sup>

My purpose here goes beyond the personal. In writing, Fox had an ulterior motive. He was pointing beyond himself to what he saw as God's work in his life, and we all know what that work was. Without it, we would not be here. My reasons are much more mundane. I am hoping to set the scene for some more general comments by finding some common personal ground, hoping that something of my own experience might be yours too.

### *Becoming a Friend*

When I peer back into my own history there are things I find I can see clearly and things that are far more opaque. To give an account nowadays as to why I joined the Society of Friends is to try and get back into my late adolescent or early adult frame of mind. Not an easy thing to do. Nevertheless, there are some clues, because I can call on some evidence that is closer to those days than now, and I can hardly deny written evidence from the past, of which the most obvious, I suppose, is

*Encounter with Silence.*<sup>4</sup> There is also a letter, five pages long, which I wrote when I applied for membership, nestling and happily embargoed to outside readers, in the archives at Friends House in London. I have not consulted it.

I guess I have never really doubted the existence of God. If I had to say why, I suppose it has to do with my childhood, which was very happy. I lived in the country, and was in the Sunday school of a little church to which I owe a very great deal, a place where we children were accepted, loved and given a real sense of identity. Looking back, I realize that the foundations of the religious life were laid in me at that time.

It seems to me that we find God first within and then without. I think that Quakerly distinction is sound, and I accept it. In my own experience I know that something in me responded to the fields and streams of Devonshire in a natural but transcendent way. What was said at church expressed my childish sentiments, though I was too young to be able to articulate them. I knew the God of the hymns and stories because I first knew him in my heart.

I saw the beauty of holiness every day and was able to recognize it as such. That is not enough to build a life of faith on, but it is a necessary foundation. When I found Friends, I did not need to go through a process of getting to know them. I already knew what they meant, and that this kind of Christianity was the real thing. I found among Friends, and still find, the fullest expression of Christianity that I know.

But as I have just said, it is not enough just to hear, one must act, because true religion is lived in the world. William Penn said, "True godliness don't turn men out of the world but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavours to mend it..."<sup>5</sup> I don't think I could have joined a church at ease with the established order. The most obvious sign of non-conformity in Quakerism is of course the peace testimony. It was not quasi-political pacifism that attracted me, because the peace testimony seems to me to be a consequence of Quakerism and not its fundamental principle.

Very early in my life I encountered Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book called (in English), *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it, Bonhoeffer contrasts two kinds of faith. One seeks comfort, and finds it in the familiar rituals of Christianity. The other also seeks comfort, but finds it in self denial and not self-satisfaction. Hence the distinction between cheap and costly grace. The cost lies in the conscious decision to follow Jesus, which inevitably involves hardship and maybe death, as he himself promised it might.

The grace here is a vision of the glory that is to come and the assurance that one belongs to the one who has overcome the world. There is nothing new in this because you can read it in the pages of every Christian moralist from Justin Martyr and Saint Augustine through

Francis of Assisi, George Fox and William Law down to C.S. Lewis and Billy Graham in our own day. William Penn's masterpiece is called, deliberately, *No Cross, No Crown*. I discovered among Friends an abundant source of this grace, and in Robert Barclay's words, "...I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart; and as I gave way to it I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up..."<sup>6</sup>

Paradoxically, and perhaps romantically, there was another aspect of Friends character that I admired. I was also a worldly person, and wanted a religious community that was hard-headed, and the business heritage of English Friends also spoke to my condition. Looking back now, I see that this was an aspect of a wider historical movement.

The nature and functions of the market economy reflect a tradition stretching back through the founders of the American Republic to the Scottish Enlightenment and the 17th century English Revolutions. Essential to this tradition is the idea that political and economic relationships can only exist on the basis of a widely shared morality — keeping promises, honouring contracts, accumulating wealth, religious and political toleration and the importance of the family unit as a nursery for the virtues of thrift, hard work, independence and the love of freedom. I found, and find, the congruence of traditional Quaker values with these principles of immense importance.

So these were the things that attracted me — I found the Christian faith as I understood it expressed better in the simplicity of Friends than anywhere else I had been; I found the peace testimony solid evidence of a church willing to pay the cost of discipleship; I found an inheritance based on the social and political tradition with which I identified myself — liberalism in the classical sense of that word. But above all, I found that not only did I admire Friends, I liked them. They seemed to like me to, so this is where I have happily spent the last 50 years of my life.

### ***Remaining a Friend***

Times change, though. I guess I still feel these things about my religious community, but perhaps they are not as significant to me now. Perhaps I honour them because they helped to make me what I am, but perhaps there are also other influences at work that bind me more strongly to my tradition. So it makes sense for me to ask why I remain a Friend, and the answer to this question is not quite the same.

Early on, I discovered the Quaker claim that there was that of God in everyone. This did not surprise me, or even strike me as all that original. As I have just said, I self-identify as a classical liberal, and that was the sort of thing that went without saying. It was the basis of the idea that there were certain fundamental human rights that one could not negotiate away. There is a fundamental equality between us and that was that.

However, I discovered a paradox. This assertion is clearly a dogma in the strictest sense of the word, because it is not empirically verifiable yet regarded as having absolute validity. On the other hand, it is interpreted in such a variety of ways that there is little fundamental agreement as to what it means. Some people take it to mean that each of us possesses a fragment of the Godhead, and we should base our faith on that. Others use it as a free-standing principle to support the claim that human beings are essentially good. There are many who use it to argue that religious particularity is mistaken and that therefore all religions are of equal value as pointers to the truth. Some even use this principle as a substitute for any idea of a transcendent deity.

I can see the point of each of these attitudes, but I fear they miss the point of George Fox's use of the phrase, and the significance of the fact that it dropped out of general use soon after the early period, only to be resuscitated in the 20th century. The point about Fox's claim is not just that we are made in the divine image, but that Christ is present within us and everybody else as well, seeking our response and thereby our salvation.

Personally, this conception is a constant reminder to me to seek the presence of God and not waste my time thinking or theorizing about it. There are occasions for that, but in the course of practical discipleship one's mind should be devoted to the practicalities of love. Plainly, one's attitude to other people will depend to a considerable degree on what one expects from them, and that in turn depends on who you think they are. Belief in that of God in everyone is something that my life would be empty without.

There is a second matter that is actually intimately connected with this. When I first went to Friends meetings it was for the silence. I had my own religious questions and preoccupations and they were very far from the domestic life of my meeting. I knew there were clerks and elders and overseers, and monthly and yearly meetings somewhere, and I knew there were people in the meeting whose opinion counted, but I had no conception of the Society of Friends as a church, a corporate body, a part of the body of Christ.

Well, I do now. I have always been interested in relations with other churches, and I find that what I have in common with other Christians usually outweighs our differences. However, what I find hard to understand is the way they habitually look to their clergy for inspiration and guidance. I am at home in most Christian circles, but just sometimes something is said or done that reminds me very, very sharply that I am a Quaker. And that is always something to do with a conception, or vision of what the church is. Nowadays, I have no hesitation in saying that the strongest single bond that unites me with the Society of Friends is our ecclesiology — our conception of the nature of the Church of Christ.

There is a tendency nowadays among unprogrammed Friends to see the testimonies as central to the Quaker faith. While I am in general agreement with this, I am unhappy with some of the consequences of this way of thinking. The testimonies tend to be objectified and then listed, with debate about what to include and what to leave out. The kind of testimony admitted to the list is one which enables politically active Friends to annex the approval of the tradition to things which (I suspect) they would think anyway. Ethical consumption makes the cut, but anti-abortion doesn't.

Nevertheless, even in the controversies, there is something of immense value. When I became a Friend I was looking for answers to my religious questions, and found the freedom among Friends to ask the unpalatable questions, to suspend commitment till I could make it wholeheartedly, to grow at my own pace and not to distort complicated matters so that I could understand them at my own level. That is part of what I meant about being the church. I found that Friends were *grown up*.

I say that deliberately. I had to find the rock before I could stand on it, and I found that our open-mindedness, far from promoting a wishy-washy kind of faith, in fact accentuated the seriousness of religion. It had an outworking. It is no good believing in that of God in everyone, as I have just said, unless you do something about it.

What I found in the testimonies, particularly those of peaceableness and simplicity, is a way of life that is now so second nature that I cannot conceive any other way of living. Indeed, nowadays, when I am asked what Quakerism is, I begin with the simple assertion that it is a way of life. We are, as we all know, such a diverse and argumentative crowd that I only begin to talk about any of the qualifications if my interlocutor asks.

But the point remains. We sometimes forget that religion is found in what people do, as much as what they say or believe. The testimonies are what Quakers do, and that's all I want to know. I remain a member of Indiana Yearly Meeting because that is where I find encouragement and sustenance, the sense of shared values that enable me to live my own life to the fullest extent that I can imagine.

There is one other thing. I am going to talk about the importance of identity in a minute, but I need to pre-empt that by a few remarks here. We are concerned at this conference with what the future might hold for our religious community, and trying to think what might serve us best as we move into the unknown. My own feeling is that we must, to use the words of Isaiah, look to the rock from which we were hewn.

The prophet was reminding his hearers that their identity was the same as their ancestry. We know enough about the gene pool as well as our physical and mental environment to know that happiness resides in being true to ourselves, not being discontented with what we are or wishing that we were something else.

Please understand that I am not arguing for complacency, I simply want to emphasize that what we bring to the challenges of the future is our experience of the past. It is all we have. Wisdom lies in discerning what parts of our past are relevant and useful in dealing with new and apparently unprecedented challenges.

Speaking about this process from a personal standpoint, I have to say that in the history of the Society of Friends I see one of the most inspiring ways of dealing with what is to come that I know. I did not start my life as a Friend by considering our history. Indeed, there is much about a devotion to Quaker history that I dislike. Many people use it as a substitute for the Bible because they misunderstand its inspiration. They get themselves dressed up in hats and bonnets to celebrate anniversaries, looking back it seems, to some golden age.

No, what I see is a consistency of moral scruple, based, of course, on the testimonies, which never elevates expediency over the needs of the least in the kingdom of God. That is the people you are, and I remain a Friend because that is the kind of person I want to be too. This, in a word, is where I belong.

## **11. REASONS FOR HOPE**

So let me be more precise about this. Where do I personally look for signs of hope among contemporary Friends? I am sure we all have our own points of view on this, so I am not offering anything definitive, but what I see, being able in retirement to stand back and try to give some estimate of the significance of the things I have observed over the period of my service to Friends.

### ***The Quaker Studies Movement***

I have to say I regard myself as an informed religious journalist rather than an academic. I have to put this caveat in because my first sign of hope is the growth of what I like to call the Quaker Studies Movement. There have been three phases in the growth of this movement among Friends, I think, and one very important trend throughout. We have to begin with the work of Rufus Jones with his emphasis on the mystical dimensions of Quaker faith. While we can debate the details of his case, I am quite sure his instinct was sound, and I doubt whether I would have made progress in my understanding of silence were it not for him.

What I see as the second phase is represented by the generation of Quaker scholars after the second World War who went back to the sources and produced a new vision, particularly of our origins, that was simultaneously in keeping with the more sombre post-war theological mood, and, I guess I have to say, a more accurate representation of what

early Friends said and wrote. I am, of course, talking about Arthur Roberts, Hugh Barbour, Wilmer Cooper, Canby Jones and others.

We are now in the third phase, which in some sense is the logical outcome of what these (by now) older scholars were telling us. If you look at the main academic institutions belonging to Friends in the United States, from Pendle Hill to George Fox University, you will find Quaker Studies departments prominent in each of them. If you attend gatherings like the Friends Association for Higher Education (FAHE) or the Quaker Theological Discussion Group (QTDG) you will find it very difficult to say which branch of the Society of Friends people come from, because scholarship has taught us the irrelevance of many of our traditional theological preconceptions. There is a corporate sense among people working in the field that strengthens common purpose rather than emphasizes confessional distinctiveness.

Ideas have consequences, and I am quite sure that the understanding of our history, and therefore our identity, is in good hands here. If we look for corporate self-understanding we must rely on more than emotion and personal preference. The first sign of hope to my mind is the continuing study of Friends faith and principles that is nourished by this movement.

### ***The School of the Spirit***

The second sign that suggested itself to me immediately is from the unprogrammed tradition. American Friends tend to see the separations of a couple of centuries ago as something that has harmed their fellowship. We can debate that proposition, but it is not as obvious as it might seem. Some of the underground streams of the 19th century seem to me to be flowing together in the work of the School of the Spirit, which provides opportunities for a range of religious exercises which I find exciting and regard as highly significant and worthy of much wider participation.

The School of the Spirit has its roots in a gathering called together by Sandra Cronk and Kathryn Damiano while at Pendle Hill, to explore the topic of spiritual nurture and its limited presence and practice in the Religious Society of Friends at that time. Out of these conversations they discerned a call to begin the School of the Spirit, a ministry of prayer and learning devoted to the eternal school of the spirit “where the ministers and elders are always in session.”

Nowadays, the School of the Spirit, flourishing as a ministry under the care of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, offers participants retreats, spiritual nurture, spiritual friendship and guidance and conferences and training in various fields. Its concern is with ministry and preparation for ministry through faithfulness, silent worship, inward preparation and a deepening personal awareness of the inward presence of the Spirit.

These, in fact, were traditionally the disciplines necessary for the practice of our distinctive form of worship, on which so much else

depends. This worship is not a free-for-all; it is not therapy, discussion, an encounter group — nor even a period of testimony — it is a distinctive and immensely powerful way to approach God and has its characteristic and necessary conventions embodied in those who are called to eldership and ministry, and whose gifts are recognized as such. It needs institutions, and the School of the Spirit reminds us that we are a corporate body for mutual support as well as a collection of individuals.

I think it is crucially important to encourage the growth of this kind of ministry among Friends. It gives body to our language and reminds us of why we are distinctive. In a period when serious questions are being asked in the programmed tradition (where more of this survives than is generally recognized) there is a great deal to be learned and practiced as a consequence of the work of this group of Friends. If you want hope, you will find it here.

### ***The Wider Quaker Community***

The third place where I look for signs of hope is abroad. This needs emphasis because many Friends are unaware of the serious growth in membership taking place outside the Anglo-Saxon Quaker countries. There seems to be a gentle general decline in the U.S. and in Britain and the old commonwealth countries, and probably in Kenya. There is some variation between the traditions, but on the whole, I think that the prospects for growth lie in the Great Lakes area of Africa, and in South and Central America.

In the past, such growth would be welcomed as an indication of the success of the missions. While we have the missions to thank for the numerical strength of Friends outside the comfortable nations of the North Atlantic, the new mission-inspired yearly meetings are now largely independent and doing well in a competitive environment, though it has to be said that there are places where older Friends are apprehensive that the Pentecostal churches are proving very attractive to younger people.

I must admit that I struggle against the assumption that Friends from elsewhere are really just like me, and differences are only on the surface. My self-image is of someone quite willing to change his mind if necessary. But how often in practice do I actually do this? Am I really open to correction from a Guatemalan or Rwandan Friend? Years ago, at the Friends World Conference in Chavakali, when we were discussing the peace testimony, a Friend from Turkana remarked that the bomb was not his problem. He had trouble when the Ethiopians came and tried to steal his camels.

That sort of thing is a jolt to the mental system, but it leads to the question of whether it is going to alter one's perspective or whether it just goes in the scrapbook of memory. I said quite a bit about captivity earlier on, and there are different kinds of captivity. There is the mental one, of

course, where we live within a closed system of assumptions about the world. But then there is a geographical one, as this incident illustrates.

I guess increasing globalization is going to force us to get out of this sort of mind-set fairly soon, but what I am particularly referring to here is the way we look at other Friends as variants of ourselves. I have to confess, when I go to international Friends gatherings it all seems to be done by Philadelphia and London rules. I pine for a conference run by Hispanic or African Friends, their way, with no interference from the Anglosphere. There is great hope for Friends south of the Tropic of Cancer, and we need to start tapping into it.

### ***What Canst Thou Say?***

Questioning is one of the major signs of hope I see among Friends. If you think about it, younger people have a much greater vested interest in the future than older people, because they will be alive when it arrives and some of the rest of us won't. So, hope for the future is a promise particularly significant for the young.

However, it could be that the media and popular culture, with its emphasis on what it sees as youthful values, is in a transitory phase and that in due course the ancient dialogue between young and old will reassert itself. For the health of society there always has to be a balance between the enterprise and resolution of youth and the reflective tranquility of age. The ancient patterns have great vitality, and this one has not gone away.

I would put it like this. The balance between the virtues of early life and later life gradually shifts. We do not so much acquire wisdom as develop and augment the measure of wisdom we already have. We do not so much lose our ability to question and challenge, as to lose the desire to do so, or relinquish the effort required. (This is not to say that we also do not actually learn lessons worth teaching to others, but that is not my main point here.) In my search for reasons for hope, I place the continuing questioning of our youth and younger members as one of my main findings.

You will remember George Fox's sermon at Ulverston when he was 28. He appealed for people to be honest about their religion and said, in effect, it is no good relying on what other people say, God is interested in *your* faith, the state of *your* soul. "Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?"<sup>7</sup>

Questioning lies very deep in the Quaker religious tradition, which is risky. It opens us up to making mistakes, occasionally pretty big ones. But what it does ensure is that our corporate life is based on reality and not second hand experience, and we always have a rock to return to whenever we stray from it and get into difficulties. I guess I should have

made this point when talking about why I remain a convinced Friend. The principle protects us against complacency, but at the same time ought to encourage us not to fear the new, or the questioning of our young, because these things are absolutely necessary if we are to find our way effectively into the new world that is constantly emerging.

### ***The Quality of the Pastorate***

When I lived in the U.S., I spent some years on Indiana Yearly Meeting's Ministry and Oversight Committee. Every year we had to approve the standard yearly meeting pastors' contract, knowing full well, and very sadly, that its terms would not, and could not, be met by the great majority of our meetings. I also clerked the Appraisal Committee which met, advised and recommended people entering the recording process.

So I spent some time going about the yearly meeting and getting to know folks in their home meetings. The pastors whom we met were a varied bunch. Most impressive, to me anyway, were those who received the call while working at a secular job and were in the process of moving over, often serving small rural or semi-rural meetings on a part-time basis.

Then we loaded them with requirements, designed to help, but perhaps sometimes shouldered with difficulty. There were others, of course, who had seminary training already, and here our task was somewhat different, perhaps to incorporate them more fully into the wider life of the yearly meeting.

I am getting round to saying that time moves on, and my feeling is that our pastors are better prepared for their service than ever before. Over the last century, since the pastoral system became established, the quality has increased significantly, and with all the problems surrounding pastoral provision which we still struggle with, we tend to overlook quite how far we have come, and how well we are served by our pastors. Another strong sign of hope I have is the quality of the pastorate, and I want to pay tribute to the service of those folks.

## **12. WIDER HORIZONS**

Corresponding to these signs of hope, there are tasks that need to be performed if signs are to be converted to reality. There is no law that says Friends have to continue, or indeed to continue in their present form. Unless you tend a garden it will become unkempt, then overgrown, then a trace of what it formerly was, and finally fall back into that wilderness that is the natural state of the natural world. So we need to ask what we are to do with our hopes. The words of Jeremiah's prophecy are not in doubt. The Jews in Babylonia were advised to bide their time and prepare themselves for the liberation that was to come.

## ***Living the Story***

I am now drawing to the end of my argument and I want to get to the heart of it. The purpose of what I have said about the relationship between captivity and hope in the period of the Babylonian captivity has a purpose, and it is to draw an analogy between that time and this. The analogy depends on the kind of distinction drawn by N.T. Wright in his book, *Paul — Fresh Perspectives*.<sup>8</sup> Thinking about how we relate to Christian history, which comes to us largely through writings, he makes two suggestions. One is that we find meaning by discerning in the events of the past examples of what we know anyway, so that the past becomes illustrative of general principles. The other is to find ourselves embedded as participants in the story that is being told by the past and unfolding in the present.

This is obviously a question of discernment, and intellectual hawks will immediately recognize that it is the application of contemporary ideas about how narratives function. Actually it is more than that. I have always found the phrase, “God’s plan,” glib and unhelpful, because in my mind it reduces the majesty of the divine intention towards the creation to some sort of blueprint. (I know it is a Scriptural expression, but I think we lack the language to translate it adequately.)

Throughout what I have said is the assumption that we are part of the same reality that Jeremiah lived in, we stand in the shoes of the captives and we can understand what the prophecy means for our own time by entering sympathetically into their experience. I guess this comes close to the reason why we have Scripture at all. You may regard it as a lawyer looks at a statute or a regulation, but I don’t. The letter kills, remember, but the spirit that pervades the Scripture gives life.

Now let’s generalize from the text we have been thinking about. Our spiritual ancestors were advised to settle down and live normally in the place to which they had been removed by forces beyond their control. They were to create farms and raise families, to trust God and to live in hope, confident that in the fullness of time they would be redeemed from all those things which restricted them.

To discern the promise behind the text we need to apply it to our own situation as best we can. We are obviously not in any sort of captivity, and to pretend we are is silly. In any case, the dispensation of the gospel, as opposed to the dispensation of law, is a spiritual and not a temporal reality. In the story of which we are a part, we have been enrolled in a kingdom that is not of this world. Nevertheless, we are children of our time, and we live in an environment, the values and standards of which are set by others.

I would not want to live in a theocratic society, Christian or otherwise. The Christian theocracies of medieval Europe and their counterparts in Münster and Geneva do not attract me. I am more than happy to live

under the Establishment Clause which provides a level playing field for the proclamation of the gospel, whatever other problems come in its train. Never forget how fortunate this country is. Your freedom depends on an equal freedom for those you disagree with, because freedom is indivisible, as John F. Kennedy said.

As I argued earlier, the challenge of having values and standards set by others is that in preaching the gospel we have two difficulties to overcome. The first is making what we have to say comprehensible in terms that people can understand. The second — granted a terminology — is to persuade people that the good news is everything we claim it to be.

Now this is something that requires thought, and the Christian community is always, in every generation, engaged in the process. It is an exciting and risky process, and Christians themselves are often highly suspicious of the process, wrongly. It is common for innovators to be regarded as heretics, also wrongly. The faith grows like a plant, not a crystal. It responds to stimuli, and if it doesn't, it dies.

I would have thought it fairly obvious that we are going through a period of unprecedented change. Indeed, I am not going to argue the point. We tend to forget that it was less than 50 years ago that Penzias and Wilson discovered cosmic microwave radiation and finally swung the astronomical community behind the big bang theory of cosmic origins. I offer this as an illustration, merely, but it profoundly shifts our understanding of the universe we live in, and in the broadest sense of all, the parameters within which we interpret the world of our experience and what it means to be human.

### ***Welcoming the Future***

So we face, in an acute form, the question of how new knowledge and new understanding are related to what we already know and understand. Do we have to junk the past or do we have to develop what we learned in it? This is an important question for the life of the mind in any event. Having been taught economics when the influence of John Maynard Keynes was at its peak, I retain a great affection for the man. He enunciated a principle by which his own ideas became vulnerable to criticism, "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do?"

That, sadly, is wisdom, but not the conventional wisdom. As a rule, people tend to make the facts fit their opinions and not the other way around, corporately as well as individually. Friends should be particularly aware of this reality. On the one hand we are a non-creedal body, guided we hope by the light of continuing divine revelation; but on the other we are in both our branches a traditional people who are very hard to change. We like our traditions because they give us our identity. In view of this, it makes sense to ask how much of the past we need.

One can answer this question in general terms, of course, but for the moment I am concerned with the challenges facing the church at large and not our particular little bit of it, because I am quite sure that as the church goes, so will Friends. What then are the frontiers within which we have to think? What are the parameters, the limits, the confines, the challenges that will imprison us unless we take them head on and respond?

What follows is my take on this situation. I have chosen two biblical expressions to mark the two extremes of our experience as individuals, each of which has a significant religious dimension. It is within this broad context that the Society of Friends has to decide where it stands and why, and thereby how it can emancipate itself from the fate of being simply a reflection of the wider society in which it lives. It needs a sense of how to become a self-conscious body with a sense of identity and an awareness of the contribution it can make to wider debates. This is where I focus my comments on its hopes and its future.

### **(a) Reading the Book of Life**

I begin with a point I have already touched on, the possibility of using biotechnology to produce a new kind of human. That the technology exists or is in process of discovery I have no doubt. I also have little doubt that it will produce serious benefits in the field of medicine. What concerns me, however, is what we, as the public, should be thinking about this reality. Is it possible to control the search for knowledge in this particular case when we have no such inhibitions elsewhere? Are there kinds of research that we consider acceptable and others not? If we think moral principles are involved, whose moral principles, expressed through which authoritative body, are to prevail?

The central point here seems to me to be how we regard life itself. This is a practical question as well as a philosophical and religious one, and it is no longer academic. I guess the answer we return will be the one on the basis of which the questions I have just asked will be answered. Put it like this, "Life is \_\_\_\_\_." What are we going to put in the blank space? There are plenty of answers, of course, but I think that in practice we have a tendency to fall back on the answers we have always found convincing, and reprise the arguments familiar to us in discussion of such things as euthanasia, capital punishment, abortion and when to switch off life-support machines.

Suppose then we have the courage to look at the preconceptions that produce the beliefs we have. We will find, I think, that there is a vision, or a world-view, a set of beliefs which form the logical foundation of our attitudes. Whether we believe in God or not, I think that what causes us to accept and act on these principles can only be described as faith. If I may remind you, Hebrews says that faith is what establishes

for us that our hope is securely based and takes us beyond appearance to underlying reality. The text claims that this is the means whereby we come to grasp the principle of creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>9</sup>

My own feeling with the passing of time is that we have reached the point at which these questions are being asked with increasing urgency, and frequently communication is nonexistent because discussion does not take place at a fundamental level. There is a Human Fertilization and Embryology bill going through Parliament in the United Kingdom which contains certain clauses known to be offensive to Catholic members. After a period in which it was thought that there would be minimal recognition of private conscience, the government ultimately allowed a free vote, so Muslims, agnostics, atheists -- Protestants, even, were able to engage in the debate without regard to party affiliation.

Naturally these debates were widely covered in the press and on television. While one does not necessarily agree with the results, it was encouraging to see the legislature debating matters of ultimate importance in which there can be many viewpoints, all of which must be heard if we are eventually to produce a widely acceptable understanding of the nature and significance of human life.

The debate continues, and a body like the Society of Friends that believes that there is that of God in everyone ought to have a great deal to say about this.

### **(b) The Vine and the Fig Tree**

Aristotle said we come together in order to live, but we live in cities to live the good life, and Jeremiah would have agreed with that. Part of Jeremiah's diagnosis of the state of society in his day was that people did not know, or refused to recognize, what the good life consists of. The answer was freely available. What more does God require of you, said Micah, somewhat earlier, than to love mercy, do justice and walk humbly with your God?

Mercy and humility are virtuous dispositions in the individual citizen. But justice goes beyond that, and reflects the foundations of society, requiring the application of moral thought to social realities that go beyond ourselves. The personal is indeed the political. I have my own unique experience of social life which is limited to my circumstances, but there are features of it that are common to the lives of everybody else, most of whom I do not know and never, ever see.

What Adam Smith called "the invisible hand" affects me and I am living less than the good life if I do not enquire as to its nature and influence on me and all those in my position. This is the point at which ethics becomes politics and it cannot be avoided, as Jeremiah forcefully reminds us. The good life, then, is only liveable in society. The central teaching of Jesus concerned this very point. There is a divine order in

human society, he taught, and our first concern should be to embody it.

The society like the one which passed into the oblivion of the Babylonian captivity could not be described as just. The most obvious sign of this was the existence of great wealth and extreme poverty within the same community. The prophets leave us in no doubt that the conspicuous consumption of their times was based on riches ultimately derived from the exploitation of the poor.

This is the genesis of the idea that the love of money is the root of all evil. If the desire for material goods gets out of hand, other evils will follow, because their purpose will be to maintain the individual in the enjoyment of what money can buy. It is a short step from simple greed to the use of personal influence and bribery to get what one wants. The desire for wealth can therefore breed the desire for power. Unless there are representative institutions, there is no redress against these excesses and therefore no justice.

It would be foolish, in my opinion, to take these circumstances as a template for understanding our own times, though the human impulses that lie behind them are still very much alive. Liberal democracy interposes a whole range of institutions between the citizen and the state — limited and representative government, the rule of law, property rights, a flourishing civil society and the separation of church and state. Israel and Judah were not liberal democracies.

However, the state as an entity is not necessarily benign, and the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. The political classes may be honourable and have the best interests of the people at heart, but that is not necessarily a guarantee that the people's interests will be served. Freedom is not an abstract thing. It needs to be expressed in institutions, which need to be encouraged and protected, even against those temporarily in charge of them.

In contemporary Europe, we can observe what I think is a new phenomenon, the process whereby government becomes increasingly complex, attempting to regulate so many activities that it seems impossible for one person or group of people to have a real grasp of everything that is going on at any level of government. This is beginning to be called the "democratic deficit," and I am sure something of the sort is true in the U.S. also. It represents an increasing lack of responsiveness by government to individual citizens and an increasing alienation from the political process.

Allied to this is the degradation of the soil out of which democracy grows, partly by the processes I referred to earlier. Politics is by definition the business of the community, and when technical change, the pursuit of wealth and the privatization of leisure combine to draw people's attention increasingly to their own individual affairs, something has to give. The result is a weakening of the institutions in which freedom and justice are embodied.

Contributing to this process is the way in which television and the press have come to enjoy an influence almost unknown two generations ago. By definition, the media are simply the channels through which the information we need to be responsible citizens comes to us. We all know the phrase, “news management.” But suppose that information is tarnished? Suppose that in fact it is being manipulated to persuade or mislead us? If so, then the first casualty is trust, and the second is truth.

Yet trust and truth are things that most of us would regard as inseparable from justice, and if they are, the preservation of freedom and the principles of liberal democracy assume a religious as well as a secular importance. There are many voices and many conflicting interests in political life, but if the religious voice is absent, something will be seriously wrong.

A body that first called itself the Society of Friends of Truth should have a great deal to say about this.

### **13. RETURN TO JEREMIAH**

Let us now have one last look at the words of Jeremiah, who, as I have said, is usually taken as a by-word for gloom. We have seen that he denounced apostasy, idolatry, syncretism and injustice among the people to whom he was sent, but paradoxically, the words we have been reflecting on are strongly upbeat ones. Rightly, I think. Revelation comes through the course of history as well as through the human heart, and we sometimes need to be reminded that we live in a new dispensation in which the theme is victory.

Jeremiah’s diagnosis therefore needs to be considered and applied, but with the benefit of hindsight. That part of history is not going to be repeated, but the diagnosis remains a convincing account of the temptations human beings and those who take religion seriously are prone to. My contention here is that such temptations remain part of the religious scene, but that Quaker principles are an excellent antidote to them. Our heritage gives us something to say in the modern world that we should not be reluctant to proclaim wherever and whenever we get the chance. There is a hope and a future, and our own tradition can give us an assurance of its nature and confidence in its relevance and pertinence.

#### ***Knowing God***

What I want to say under this head is perhaps an account of Friends at their best, but why not? We all have a dream about the church we belong to, and this, I guess is part of mine. I have already said that among Friends I found a way to the divine presence within, and surely

there is nothing greater in human experience than this. I don't see how one can claim anything different from the perspective of any of the great religions of the world, let alone the Judeo-Christian tradition to which we belong.

Each of the world's great faiths has created a cultural superstructure of immense value, but this, in and of itself, creates certain problems. Among them is the undoubted fact that it is possible to appear to practice the religion by carrying out its formal obligations without entering into the experience that was responsible for its coming into being in the first place. Moreover, it is also possible to be a devout skeptic or an admirer from afar, someone who sees the point of faith without being able or willing to make a commitment. One might even derive great enjoyment from art, music and literature with only a hazy understanding of what lies behind them.

What these three cases have in common is that they are, in my experience, socially acceptable, and in certain classes of society regarded as evidence of refined sensibility. You occasionally see them reflected in book reviews and articles in the better sort of newspaper and magazine. I have the feeling that some people regard it as more broadminded to be an agnostic rather than an atheist.

Something in me has a great sympathy with this, but another part of me rebels, and says that this is dangerous. It reflects the undoubted fact that religion has great aesthetic appeal, but overlooks the transformational character of religious experience. In a rounded faith both elements are present, of course, but what we have here is a failure of the various elements in the faith to be properly focused. When the focus becomes blurred, one cannot see the true nature of what is being observed.

This, I think, was the substance of what Friends perceived in the 17th century, though it is an insight not limited to that time and to those people. Friends are characteristic of a certain frame of mind rather than the originators of it. But what matters is the frame of mind. The first stricture Jeremiah levelled against his contemporaries was apostasy — abandonment of their religious faith. That word covers a number of circumstances and carries within it an analysis and a certain judgmentalism that we would want to unpack in modern circumstances.

At first sight the U.S. might be considered a Christian nation, and culturally I am sure it is, contrary to what many people would prefer. Europe is in a similar position, but the cultural artifacts of religion there have little life in them, a cathedral to visit, a performance of the St. Matthew passion to attend, perhaps. Here, church life is much more vigorous and active than in the old world. But the tendency to apostasy is also visible. Because of a particular religious heritage it is too easy for Americans to conflate patriotism and divine blessing, and that is one of the major forms of apostasy we read about in Jeremiah. It is also possible

for Americans to take the opposite position and see their nation as the root of much of the world's evil.

Without deciding whether either of these viewpoints represents the truth, I think we can agree that they represent permanent possibilities open to the American people, because they are a necessary feature of any society within the Christian cultural tradition. But this brings us back to Jeremiah's question. How far does society reflect broadly religious sensibilities and how far does it genuinely reflect experience of the divine?

In drawing lessons from our text I want to say I think this is the highest priority. I have outlined the debates taking place in our culture that I think Friends ought to be particularly involved in at both national and local levels. These debates focus on the perennial, yet intensely modern question of how we can talk intelligibly and convincingly about the nature of God and what kinds of experience of the divine reality are open to human beings.

There seems to me to be two stages to this process, or two elements. I am speaking here about the unreached, the unchurched, the unconvinced. The first is the process of learning to speak about God in a way which is uncluttered by cultural baggage. It is hard for us sometimes to come to terms with the fact that the language and concepts that are so dear to us are literally meaningless to increasing numbers of people in the kind of emerging world I have been discussing at various points in this lecture.

Now look at the vocabulary and insights of the Quaker tradition. It is certainly the case that in traditional Quakerism both Scripture and reason have an important place in understanding the faith, but the early Friends were not questioning their authority as much as their priority in importance. They pointed out, to my mind convincingly, that the heart needed to be prepared for the reception of truth, the crooked made straight and the rough places plain.

People have, I think, a sense of their own conditions, and the task of religious leadership is not to flatter them with a spurious gospel of personal or national reassurance, but to look into people's hearts and show them where life is to be found. The traditional vocabulary of Friends, the light and the seed, are positive images devoid of baggage. In real evangelism, the kind Jeremiah would have understood, these are words of life and have great power.

There is another level, however, at which we need to aim, another debate in which Friends need to be involved, and which many in the churches fail even to recognize, let alone comprehend. I gave this lecture the title "Living in a New World" because it seems to me that the old solutions no longer hold good because the old problems are rapidly diminishing in importance.

Let me give just two examples. First, what is our conception of creation

in the face of the possibility of multiple universes and string theory? If the churches are unable to find new images to take account of new scientific conceptions that will be commonplace in coming generations, they have no future. Second, what then becomes of objective theism, the doctrine of God as creator and orderer of all that is? At this point the argument from religious experience reaches its limits, and hard thinking becomes necessary.

### ***Keeping the Faith***

Now to a subject that is controversial, touchy even, and runs against many widely-held contemporary views. In Jeremiah we read that among the things unacceptable to God were star worship, (by which I take it he means astrology and fortune telling), and syncretism, the attempt to combine the teaching, practice and beliefs of more than one religious system, as evidenced by the altars of foreign gods in the temple. This might sound intolerant to some of our contemporaries, but if we want to take the measure of Jeremiah we have to think about it.

Syncretism of the Old Testament kind rests, I think, on the basic assumption by those practicing it that Yahweh is not all-powerful, for there would be no need to entertain the idea if he were. It carries the implication that the divine powers discernible in the universe are distributed among a number of foci. Hence the cosmos have no necessary unifying principle and the powers are potentially in conflict with one another. It is plain to see how this can lead to superstition rather than science in the long run.

Things are different nowadays. There is an atmosphere of religious pluralism in the developed world, and I would say that there has been serious progress in the ways different communities have learned to live together. It is fair to say that the three Abrahamic faiths are based on a specific version of the philosophy of objective theism, and one does not have to be a syncretist to note the strong similarities between them. Many Sikhs and Hindus are of this mind too.

Part of this progress has a political origin, of course, and is due to a widespread adoption of the enlightenment principles of toleration and the separation of church and state in civil society. Moreover, the same movement of thought, in the West anyway, has produced the conception that if truth is indivisible, there is truth to be found in all faiths, and what they have in common is more important/preferable than what they have to say distinctively/uniquely.

This viewpoint is found in many parts of the Quaker community, though one has to say not in the majority group. That does not prevent it from being true though, and nobody who is serious or informed about religion in our day and age can avoid taking a position on it. One of the best and most serious examinations I have read of what is involved in the

modern encounter between the faiths is *Truth and Tolerance* by, of all people, Joseph, Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI.<sup>10</sup>

But pluralism can present problems. It is customary for people in more secular western countries to approach the phenomenon in a fairly abstract way. It is interesting in itself and the promotion of religious understanding is seen as part of the wider values of society, in which there is mutual respect between different religious and often ethnic groups. There is an assumption (not unchallenged by secularists, of course) that people are entitled to their religious beliefs and that these beliefs are entitled to respect.

This may be a desirable state of affairs, but the question of whether it is entirely realistic is beginning to make itself felt. Religion and culture are closely associated with one another and, when societies begin mixing, there may be conflicts that are very difficult to reconcile. One example of this is the ritual slaughter of animals.

Another is the toleration of polygamy in hitherto monogamous societies. In Europe there is a problem of whether, if churches are allowed to ring their bells, the muezzin might also be permitted to call in certain neighborhoods several times a day. Equality may say yes, but the indigenous culture may take exception to the extension of such liberty in some very harmful ways. Here we get to the heart of the contemporary problem of the relationship between the faiths. One can get degrees from reputable universities in the subject, but this is a practical not a theoretical matter.

Many Friends take the view that there is truth to be found in all faiths, and that consequently no faith has a monopoly of the truth — a perfectly tenable position within the Quaker tradition. This originated, I think, in a combination of the mystical interpretation of Quakerism and the post-sixties interest in the eastern faiths. But the hippie trail is over, and we are now faced with the formidable challenge of a self-confident, well-financed, influential, culturally distinctive and expansionary Islam, with whose faith and practice we are already being called upon to make concessions.

So I pose the problem which I actually think is one of the most far-reaching that we face today. How are we going to meet the challenge of another faith that knows who it is, what it teaches and where it is going? I say this because there is much that I admire in Islam, but I do not wish to be a Muslim. I do not wish to live in an Islamic state or society, and I am strongly opposed to many of the efforts now being made to accommodate the beliefs of those who do.

In the coming years we will be drawn increasingly into a public debate about these things, and I believe that Friends, if they go about the task properly, are well equipped to make a significant contribution to this work. The reason lies in certain aspects of our tradition that we

may be able to put to good use. One of the most hallowed words in our vocabulary is “truth,” not in an abstract but a biblical way, as in to love in the truth, to walk in the truth, obey the truth — all practical, personal things, a matter of relationship.

So what kind of agenda will this encounter throw up? It is tricky because Muslims and Christians have much in common among their many differences. What do we think about revelation? How does the Muslim understanding of the nature of God compare with the Christian understanding? How do the defining features of the Umma compare with the institution of the Church? Is the Sharia law compatible with the ethics of post-enlightenment Christianity? Can Muslim political thought accommodate the Christian distinction between the sacred and secular authority?

A quick glance at these topics will show how fundamental they are, and how the highest standards of thought will be necessary if we are to enter the debate. This is what interfaith dialogue requires today. The temptations of a modern form of syncretism, the thought that in order to accept the truth in another’s viewpoint one has to alter one’s own, will never be far away. I think that Jeremiah would bless our endeavors to understand and to reconcile, but I think he would also advise us to remember that, when we talk to missionaries, what they are after are conversions and not conversations.

### ***Happiness and Integrity***

The text we have used for our conference is about life in captivity, and that captivity is presented to us by the prophet as the inevitable outcome of failure to hear and follow the word of God. Clearly if we cease to give God our exclusive devotion we forfeit his protection also. It is in those circumstances that trouble comes. Seeking insurance by placing faith elsewhere indicates a loss of trust and a regression to things we should have outgrown. We place our trust, therefore, in things that are not trustworthy.

This is a dangerous thing to do, and this is why the prohibition of idolatry is given the highest order of priority among the Ten Commandments. A sacrifice demonstrated one’s allegiance and to change one’s allegiance was to change one’s values fundamentally.

We also see this in the story of the Apple of Discord that ultimately led to the Trojan War, which recounts the rivalry between the goddesses Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. The elements in the story involve their vain desire to be the fairest, and the impossible position in which the mortal, Paris, was placed in being obliged to choose between them. His choice of beauty over wisdom showed where his ultimate values lay.

So how do we form our ultimate values? How do we come to choose one set rather than another? I don’t suppose we are ever entirely free

in decisions of this kind, but that should not stop us from doing the best we can. I suppose I would start by asking what it is that makes something valuable. Clearly in Paris' case it was divine favor and he had three divinities to choose between. His choice reflected a great deal about what kind of person he was, and also what kind of divine favor was on offer.

I guess I do not think that the things human beings desire have changed much over the millennia. The study of history and literature reveals the same old stories. People desire power and influence, wealth and security, love and sexual gratification and things of that sort. I have too, so I am not making too big a deal about this. Indeed, without a sense of these things I doubt whether I would either understand or enjoy the whole world of art, politics, literature and social life in its widest sense.

What matters is not that we have these impulses, but what we do with them, as the second commandment implies. If we did not have a choice, the commandment would be redundant. My own sense is that as the human race has evolved, many of the instincts we needed for survival in the wild have been very subtly changed. We have discovered all sorts of mechanisms whereby things useful in a state of nature, but harmful in society, can be rendered useful, productive and beneficial to all.

This, in other words, is the nature of civilization. While, as I have already indicated, I think we make progress, I do not believe that this process is automatic, and indeed it seems plain to me that gains can turn into losses very easily. The clue as to why this is lays in the idea of human nature that Christians understand very well. We are given freedom of the will in which we can choose, either to follow and obey God's commands or not, and that our personalities possess a rebellious streak that is ultimately self-destructive.

This is why the story of the Apple of Discord takes us beyond the biblical narrative into a wider context for understanding the human condition. It tells us, if we are willing to listen, that this is how we are — at least for the short while that we listen to the story and put ourselves in the shoes of the Trojan prince. This is why all literature is ennobling. George Fox said he was led through all kinds of spiritual struggles to achieve a sense of all conditions, precisely to be able to speak to all conditions. To enter into the world of the imagination is the first step towards grasping the truth of the second commandment.

One might put this another way. The French proverb says that to understand all is to forgive all. At one level this is telling us that when we stand in somebody else's shoes we learn to see things from their point of view. But the point of the proverb is the use of the word "all." It is reasonably easy to extend our sympathy to those we sympathize with in the first place, but we move beyond literature into ethics when we make decisions about who is worthy of sympathy and who is not.

The proverb offers us wise advice. It reminds us that valuable though our own efforts at moral discernment may be, we will fall into error if we rely on our own judgment, and the unstated reason is that we are then usurping the divine prerogative. In other words, we have the permanent tendency towards idolatry in our hearts.

Jeremiah knew about this. He understood well what we would call the pressures acting on the individual, those influences sometimes from society, sometimes arising within ourselves. We have said something about them earlier. My point is that though we are separated by more than two millennia from Jeremiah's time, we are essentially of the same nature as people then, with the same impulses and desires, and what is to the point, capable of making exactly the same psychological moves to deal with the problem of living with ourselves.

Our own times do not seem to me to be so different from what has gone before. We have our own characteristic idols which draw us away from God and we all know what they are. The contemporary idols I recognize most readily are the cult of celebrity and the desire for fame, whether or not accompanied by achievement. What I find objectionable in these things is that they are offensive to human dignity and elevate false values by making appearance more important than reality. I see what is usually known as consumerism as the outward expression of these values. If we cannot be a celebrity, we can at least dress like one, and adopt all the trappings of fame, courtesy of our preferred celebrity magazine.

I wouldn't push this too far, because there is much good in modern life too. My concern is for the public mood and public values, the things which tell us about what we collectively stand for, what we believe the good life to be, how we should act in community and what we should teach our children.

It might seem strange that a passage about idolatry should be headed, "Happiness and Integrity." Not really. I have been examining the vitality of the Quaker faith in the modern world and chose deliberately to suggest that one of the greatest attractions of the Quaker way of life is its countercultural nature and how the integrity of this way of life fits the concerns of so many modern people and offers a way of life that is challenging and inspiring, and a conclusive antidote to the tiredness of the consumer and celebrity culture.

In a word, I have been looking at what I take to be the essence of our testimonies, to simplicity, truthfulness, peaceableness, respect for others and all the rest. These may be ideals or principles of action, but they are much more than that. Their essence is that they are reflections of lives which have God, and not human, concerns and stratagems at their heart. They represent, in fact, the ultimate idolatry-free life.

And what more is that than the happiness with which I began?



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Punshon, *Reasons For Hope*, (Richmond IN: Friends United Press, 2001)

<sup>2</sup> John Punshon, *Patterns of Change*, (Richmond IN: Friends United Press, 1987)

<sup>3</sup> George Fox, *Journal* (1694), ed. Nickalls, (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1975), p.1

<sup>4</sup> John Punshon, *Encounter with Silence*, (Richmond IN and London, FUM and QHS, 1987)

<sup>5</sup> In *Quaker Faith and Practice*, (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1994), extract 23.02

<sup>6</sup> Robert Barclay, *Apology* (1676), ed. Freiday, (Newberg OR: Barclay Press, 1991), p.254

<sup>7</sup> In *Quaker Faith and Practice*, (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1994), extract 19.07

<sup>8</sup> N.T.Wright, *Paul — Fresh Perspectives*, (London: SPCK, 2005)

<sup>9</sup> Hebrews 11:1

<sup>10</sup> Joseph, Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance — Christian Belief and World Religions*, (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 2004)

## BIOGRAPHY

Now retired, John Punshon was professor of Quaker Studies at Earlham College and Earlham School of Religion, and is a recorded minister in Indiana Yearly Meeting. Two of his books, *Encounter with Silence* and *Testimony and Tradition*, deal with aspects of Quaker spirituality, and his latest work, *Reasons for Hope*, is a study of evangelical Quakerism. He is married, with two grown children, one a dressmaker, the other a stock-exchange official, and four grandchildren. His passions in life include newspapers, the countryside, cricket and the aforesaid grandchildren. He finds opinions far more interesting than news.







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