



Quakers and other faiths

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Introduction

This booklet is an open but internal document for use by local Quaker Meetings and Quaker institutions. It has been written by the Quaker Committee on Christian and Interfaith Relations (QCCIR), a standing committee of Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) appointed by its Meeting for Sufferings.

Our aim is to help Quakers in Britain to answer questions like:

How do we relate to people of other faiths in our local communities?

- In what circumstances does this become a valuable practice or indeed a critical necessity?
- In doing so, how should we gain a greater understanding of their beliefs, practices and cultures?
- Have we as Friends a prophetic role in promoting understanding?
- Are there some issues that cannot be bypassed in the interests of goodwill?
- In dialogue and engagement, how clear are we about what we have to offer, and about where we ourselves may have questions to answer?
- What insights, experiences and ideas have we to share among fellow-Friends?

We published a parallel booklet *Quakers and the Ecumenical Agenda* in June 2009. This had the purpose of describing Friends' commitment to their work with other Christian churches in Britain. It explores perceptions of spiritual experience, language, authority, and of gifts given and received.

Quakers have acknowledged the reality and significance of other faiths from the outset. George Fox quoted from the Qur'an in writing to the King of Algiers about slavery. William Penn in 1682 spoke to the native Americans as an equal in their own language, speaking of 'the Great Spirit who made me and you'. John Woolman a hundred years later, with support of his Monthly and Quarterly Meetings, engaged with them in the same way.

The Friends Foreign Mission Association (founded in 1868) reflected nineteenth century concerns to convert the 'heathen'. This disparaging term seldom featured in the writings of the missionaries themselves, whose service appears to have been more meeting local needs and searching for common ground. The Association became part of the new Friends Service Council in 1928 as its witness gradually gave way to other purposes. Its former secretary Henry Hodgkin wrote in 1933, 'I really find myself wanting to learn from people from whom I would previously have regarded as fit objects for my missionary zeal' (QF&P 27.07). British and so-called 'unprogrammed Friends' should be aware that evangelical Friends in the USA nevertheless have continued to evangelise at home and abroad.

Our recent books of discipline (1960, 1995) have invited us to recognise the spirituality and good works of those faithful to other religions. Our present QCCIR, branching out from an existing Quaker Committee on Christian Relationships, got its name in 1991.

What, then, is the interfaith agenda for Friends?

It starts with encounters. This may be with neighbours or work colleagues. Or it may be on a professional level, when we are doctors or patients, teachers or pupils, prison chaplains, magistrates. We become aware of differences in culture, religion, ethnicity, language, social behaviour. We may feel a concern about social needs around us, particularly if there are community tensions or patterns of disadvantage. We may have a spiritual curiosity about how faith works in contexts other than our own. Some Quakers may have reached the Society of Friends carrying with them an agenda or connection to another faith, from their upbringing, family relationships, or personal searches for spiritual sustenance.

One thing that is clear is that an open mind cannot be an empty mind if one is to enter with respect into unfamiliar people's lives. Even at the level of neighbourliness each of us needs a basic grasp of etiquette – what behaviour is likely to give offence – and if possible a knowledge of the day by day and year round pattern of observances likely to be found.

As Quakers we can claim to have gifts to offer. There is more to it than the traditional Testimonies, which are based on the personal experience of generations of Friends, but these are a starting point. However we should also never forget that other faith traditions have insights, teachings and practices which may parallel our own, and indeed hold lessons for us.

Truth, in our tradition, goes together with love. It is about integrity, speaking or acting openly and honestly, in ways which may sometimes be uncomfortable or unpopular. This may cause anxiety, but with sensitivity it can also bring freedom and joy, and enhance relationships. It is open to new insights from whatever source they may come. It challenges prejudices.

Peace, with its focus on not taking life to resolve an issue, is about positively seeking to listen and understand other people even those we may not like, or who behave very differently from us. It is seeking

justice through positive alternatives to conflict or violence using constructive and imaginative approaches to difficult problems.

Equality governs all our human relationships. It is about valuing the divine spark in every person, accepting differences, and respecting everyone's potential contribution to community well-being. It is more than just an absence of discrimination.

Simplicity, which is a Quaker tradition, is about choosing a life-style that puts the quality of relationships before the quantity of possessions: values before valuables. Adjusting to a simpler life-style is something that faces us all as we seek to manage a sustainable life. It is cherishing what is essential, not glumly doing without.

We can elaborate a little on these. The strongly established Quaker appreciation that religious Truth cannot be captured in words inevitably points to its transcendent nature. This confidence that Truth is something 'beyond' makes space and allows respect for other versions of it. Nor does Truth exist in a vacuum. Thus Friends strive to ensure that it is not separate from either love or humility. With a capital T, Truth can thus be a pathway to the Absolute that the faithful seek, rather than a possession.

The testimonies to Peace and Equality are also applicable at a different level. In terms of Peace, violent conflict which claims a religious endorsement (or even encouragement), or which is directed against another faith tradition's followers, is not acceptable to Friends. Peace pre-supposes the obligation to address conflicting views and interests nonviolently. Yet challengingly, some other religions have a reverence for life that may go beyond our own.

In terms of Equality, respect is owed to members and followers of all religions and faiths (or none) as individuals, regardless of what we may see as weaknesses in their chosen paths. When other religious traditions promote beliefs and actions that contradict Quaker testimonies and insights, this can give a creative opportunity, when appropriate, for a critical response from Friends.

Simplicity extends to sustainability, and Friends are active in concern for the future of the planet. Again, other religions have insights in this area which we can well learn from.

Quakers also have gifts to offer of a less abstract kind.

- Our non-credal faith and lack of formality encourage us to engage with a wide variety of religious manifestations.
- Our silent worship can have a uniting influence, since those who might sometimes recoil from presentations of the beliefs, ritual and imagery of faiths other than their own should not be troubled by it.
- Our premises are similarly welcoming, and their style allows them to offer a meeting place which has the character of neutral ground.
- We do not have a separated priesthood, as all may equally share in and witness to the spirit.
- Women and men play an equal part in all that we do.
- We thus have a non-hierarchical organisation, which enables Friends to mix easily with individual believers and equally with faith leaders.
- Our practice of making formal appointments for a limited period of time is a witness to both equality and good human resource management.
- Our business method (which can avoid the so-called 'tyranny of the majority') is sometimes a revelation to those who have not met it. (In consequence, for example, the World Council of Churches has now abandoned straight voting.)
- Our treasuring of the sacred in the everyday allows us to respect sanctification processes observed in other faith strands without compromising our own practices.

Some of these gifts may have a negative element. Counterpart individuals in hierarchical systems may be disconcerted by a lack of continuity in the Quaker representation. Some will find it hard to respect our lack of credal certainty. Some of us may compound this by a lack of background knowledge – both of where we come from, and of the religion of those we engage with. The diversity of belief in the Quaker community will seem a weakness to some, but our history, testimonies and practice give us a shared sense of identity within which we can each maintain our witness.

What do other faiths offer to us?

The faith teachings of the world religions would not have developed without offering truths to their followers. Of those truths that resonate with Quaker experiences and practices, we can use the mutual understanding as a starting point. There is also a wider range of spiritual gifts offered to us with which, in discernment, we can engage. Those of us who have grown up, or for a time found a home, in other faiths will often bring valuable insights and depth of understanding to our Meetings.

Music, ritual, imagery can have a strong spiritual impact on believers, and indeed on those of no professed faith. They have been stripped from our own practice as distractions from the gathered intensity of a worshipping Quaker group. Nowadays many Friends take sustenance from these resources where they find them, and they help us to lead fuller lives. Our worship without them can nevertheless be the richer for the resonance of our wider cultural and devotional experiences.

We can welcome traditions of hospitality, some remarkably generous, perhaps as a lesson to us when we are too diffident.

In recognising the gifts offered by other faiths, we may usefully recall as well the insights gained from dialogue with the wider Christian community.

Furthermore, we may learn from others how they deal with a wide variety of vulnerabilities and difficulties which we ourselves have:

Sometimes within our own Meetings we are faced with beliefs and ideas which others of us find threatening or hard to live with.

- We need to recall that most Quakers world-wide belong to traditions which have many differences from ours in Britain – but sharing the core testimonies.
- We sometimes find it hard to attract young people to join us or stay with us.
- We sometimes have to decide how far to support individual demonstrations or acts of conscience which our beliefs have encouraged.

What are the 'difficult issues' that may divide us?

Again, some of these issues affect our dialogue with other Christians.

Creeds and beliefs include the nature or indeed existence of God or a Supreme Being, the nature of 'last things', the after-life, reincarnation, and the uniqueness or universal validity of one set of revelations or beliefs. We may still be able to enter dialogue on parallels with our non-credal standpoints as Quakers, and in particular on how we are to live and work alongside each other to make life on this earth a place of loving endeavour for us all. We can and do respect those whose faith is expressed in theological expressions which we do not normally use, even if our search is more for understandings 'beyond what words can utter'(I Pennington, QF&P 27.27), This what most British Quakers would say, but among Quakers world-wide over 80 per cent of us espouse Bible-based evangelical Christianity rather than the unprogrammed reliance on the Inward Light practised in this country. Thus for BYM, the latter is where ultimate authority lies: in George Fox's words, "What canst thou say?"; rather than the scriptures as such.

Conversion may become a thorny issue quite early on. The Qur'an is helpful in saying no compulsion in religion (Surah 2:256), and in saying that if Allah had wanted us to be all the same he would have made us so. Yet the apostate who abandons a faith once held may be demonised. A sense of mission to convince those of other faiths, and in particular those with none is understandable, but there can be no place for techniques of violence or psychological manipulation to achieve this. Groups (including some Christians) who see conversion as a duty may find interfaith dialogue a problem. (Matthew 28:19 is seen by them as the 'Great Commission'.) We can amicably explore the boundaries between proselytising, evangelism, mission, witness, dialogue and shared experience, and indeed limits may have to be agreed when setting up or working in interfaith bodies.

Holy books are central to many faiths: they may be seen as divine themselves (such as by Sikhs), as the word of God, as divinely inspired, or (as with Buddhists) enlightened teaching. Their interpretation or translation from forms of speech no longer current may often lead to

controversy, even if this is not admitted by all believers. It is helpful to know the historical circumstances of their emergence, especially if this can be 'triangulated' from outside sources. Supplementary texts such as the Muslim Hadith and the Jewish Mishnah carry weight. So indeed does *Quaker faith & practice* (referred to elsewhere in this document as QF&P). Friends should recognise the risk of seeming unprepared for dialogue if they know the Bible less well than their interlocutors. Certainly the application of treasured texts to modern circumstances deserves discussion, and this affects the further issues in our list. We should recognise that it is the teachings of Jesus as reported in the Gospels that have led to the Quaker testimonies we now hold dear. Organised 'scriptural reasoning' can also be productive.

Conservative/liberal cross currents are found nowadays in nearly all faiths. One issue underlying this division is where ultimate authority lies – with scriptures, with an appointed hierarchy, or with the discernment of the assembled believers. Interfaith dialogue is most likely to concern the liberal wings of the main faiths, and if shared understanding and interfaith harmony is our goal, then we and their more conservative fellow-faithful need to become better acquainted. Woman to woman contacts may be particularly fruitful. Some divisions within religions are of wider origin than those arising from pressures of scholarship and from modernity, and we should be sensitive to tensions and to historical antagonisms.

Religiously endorsed violence meets our peace testimony head on. Most religions sign up to peace as a goal, but this is interpreted differently across (and within) the faiths. The concept of a just war runs through many religions and few faith groups are specifically pacifist. This endorsement may entail providing a chaplain or equivalent to members of their religious persuasion in the armed forces. Pacifism can be stumbling block in dialogue but we do not need to shrink from discussion of conscientious objection, and the role of conscience and of human rights principles vis-à-vis faith and belief. Political tensions and the ensuing armed conflicts, currently in North Africa and the Middle East and earlier in Northern Ireland and elsewhere have divided people along religious lines. (It is also a sad and salutary fact that most major religions find themselves as victims of violent persecution in one

country and perpetrators or endorsers of it in another.) We have the experience of major Quaker and Quaker-supported programmes (such as the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine & Israel) to draw lessons from. Healing of memories (from the Crusades onwards) is a necessary step if violence is not to be self-perpetuating.

Violence as punishment (eg capital punishment, amputation or mutilation) is accepted in many religions or at least the religious leaders do not oppose such state-approved or -condoned violence. Honour-killings are not usually religiously-sanctioned but they also may sometimes be condoned by silence.

Cultural issues are deeply entangled with faith teachings. Gender justice and the managing of human sexuality are issues that give rise to practices and taboos that can get in the way of harmonious relationships. Diet, too is often problematic. Uncleanliness arises as a concept in the teachings of many faiths. Friends engaging with any faith community should prepare themselves by knowing what common courtesy requires. (Are they vegetarian? If not, what meats are allowed, and how should they have been killed? Are there rules for posture, for shaking hands, for acceptable clothing?) As observers, we cannot help wondering how some interpretations of sacred texts have arisen and how open they are to discussion. We can see how some practices make more sense in traditional settings than in technologically different societies. At an immediate practical level, anyone concerned with marriages between members of different faith communities will need to know who sets what rules and how strictly they are observed, and in particular what constraints apply to the upbringing of children.

Provocation and blasphemy, and also the desecration of graves, holy places and holy books are bound to arouse responses of anger and possible violence. There is a level of freedom of speech and tolerance in Britain which Friends broadly welcome. However, these may provide opportunities for statements or actions which some believers find unacceptable. Friends would in any case not condone any deliberate intention to humiliate or dehumanise.

‘New religious movements’ (such as followers of the Rev Moon), ancient orders revived (such as Druids), heresies and schisms (such as Jews for Jesus) present problems when established faiths see them as threats, or refuse to be part of any organisation or activity where they are present. In the case of some of these groups which are not financially or organisationally transparent, some Friends will perceive this as a lack of integrity and may feel similarly troubled. Thus the risk of the presence of particular NRMs causing one or more of the major faith traditions to withdraw from a local interfaith body may be that the witness we can share with the faiths we normally meet might be diluted or diverted. This problem also arises when Humanist movements seek to share in the representational role that nowadays religion has taken up (See Article 17 of the ‘functioning’ half [TEC] of the Lisbon Treaty).

The dimension of public life

It is possible to seek an external or internationally-agreed value base to provide a set of non-negotiable standards and obligations which believers and hierarchies in all faiths can uphold. The United Nations General Assembly in 1948 adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in which Article 18 reads:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Other UN declarations (such as that of 1981) have added obligations to this; individual thinkers, notably Hans Küng and Karen Armstrong, have developed additional propositions with claims to universality. We must recognise, however, that universality is aspiration rather than fact.

It was the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893 which gave the importance of mutual respect between faiths a widespread recognition. This was in contrast to the emphasis until then (and indeed later) in some religions on mission and conversion. The International Association for Religious Freedom followed in 1901. The thread continued in 1936 with the World Congress of Faiths, which now continues as a British-based organisation for individual membership. In 1988 the Parliament was reconstituted and has held five meetings since in various cities. Its 1993 meeting adopted the declaration, "Towards a Global Ethic" initiated by Hans Küng. Its 2009 meeting welcomed Karen Armstrong's "Charter on Compassion" but has not yet adopted it. Religions for Peace is another organisation whose title explains its aim. It works at world, national and regional level. The Europe regional membership is for 'religious leaders', including those from 'religions with a shorter presence in Europe'. The UK branch is for individual membership.

In Britain, as in other countries, there are now a number of national and local interfaith groups and committees. The Inter Faith Network

for the UK was founded in 1987 and links in membership national faith community representative bodies; national, regional and local interfaith bodies; and educational and academic bodies with a focus on inter faith issues. In its national faith community body category of membership it links those from nine major faith traditions (including some internal variants such as Unitarians among the Christians). They are Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian. It does not so far in this category include further traditions. Representatives from these nine communities meet regularly as its Faith Communities Forum. QCCIR is normally represented there. Some of the other active bodies in this field are bilateral, like the Council of Christians and Jews, the Christian Muslim Forum and the new Hindu Christian Forum. There is also the Three Faiths Forum which links the three Abrahamic faiths. The CTBI (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland) has a Churches' Inter Religious Network which brings together those in the wider Christian community active in interfaith relationships.

We invite Friends to explore local opportunities and organised interfaith bodies, not only as members of local society, but in order to advance the part that faith communities can play in making this country a worthy place to live in.

We need to be aware that the British Government currently maintains a counter-terrorism policy that includes a programme known as PREVENT. This requires dialogue within sectors such as education, criminal justice, health, and also faith, where there is a risk of radicalisation. The labelling or judgement of faith groups, and in particular their mainstream communities, is to be expressly avoided. However, the programme specifically warns that terrorist ideas may be espoused or circulated by apparently non-violent organisations. Helpfully, community integration projects have now been distanced from the implications of the PREVENT programme. The government has published its clear intention to encourage dialogue between people of different faith and cultural backgrounds, and to defend the role of faith in public life.

Government departments and also local authorities can be sources of funds for faith-based projects, such as 'Inter Faith Week' events.

Political pressures often lead them to give a high priority to even-handedness, or else they only fund those regarded as a 'safe pairs of hands' rather than engaging with more diverse or lesser known or even unconventional faith communities. Sometimes they turn to secularism as a safe option, arguing that in the case in question it is not their place to resource individual religious communities.

So, what can we do together?

Our own Quaker Committee on Christian and Interfaith Relations can work at three levels: firstly connecting with others in the faith community in various networks, secondly, writing and speaking for Quakers as a whole and thirdly listening to and supporting local Friends in their Meetings. The suggestions that follow are addressed to Friends in local Meetings and not an agenda for Committee work.

Being

Amongst ourselves and in dialogue with others, we should be open about the varying faith patterns of our own Quaker community. This will include valuing the insights of Friends who have joined us from other faith traditions, letting these deepen our own worship, knowing ourselves. The diversity can be a strength rather than an obstacle to our sense of belonging. We hope that Friends who have particular interfaith contacts or concerns are able to share their experiences with others in their Meetings.

Learning

The more we know from reading, from personal encounters and from the media about other faiths (as well as our own), the easier it will be to live in a world of mixed peoples and mixed or ignored expectations of an afterlife or end-time. More practically, it behoves us, if only as citizens, to know the pattern of communities and faiths in our own locality. Are some concentrated as a group in a particular part of town? Are some dispersed among the wider community? Are they looking for a place to meet? Are there nationality issues? Are there overt tensions? Has your Local Meeting considered a programme or agenda for interfaith study and initiatives?

Meeting

This is about meeting others, 'getting to know you'. There is neighbourliness, friendliness to those who (perhaps) hire the Meeting House for events, accepting and offering hospitality. Has your Meeting thought of an organised visit to a mosque, temple, synagogue, gurdwara, with a return invitation? Getting started may

not be easy, but the more formal suggestions in this list may bring the personal contacts needed. All this will generate the trust that makes relationships fruitful. Friends may sometimes find it hard to relate to the more fundamentalist members of other faiths (and within Christianity too). Dialogue liberal to liberal is not always enough.

Participating

Friends have sometimes taken the lead or else followed others in setting up local councils of faiths or faiths forums. Decisions on eligibility for membership are often an issue, bringing a risk of threats to resign. When Friends belong to the Churches Together movement interfaith initiatives can perhaps start from there. There are public events such as Inter Faith Weeks, Peace Walks, Remembrance ceremonies, the calendar celebrations of the various faiths – we should not be embarrassed about Christmas, either because of the early disdain of Friends or for fear of alienating non-Christians. Weddings and funerals may draw us in. There may be merit in making space for women to women or youth to youth versions of events. As well as social or public encounters, deeper levels of dialogue may follow.

Serving

Friends involved in public duties will often have to engage with faith issues. This will apply to teachers of RE, and indeed to other teachers at all levels, but a wide range of public appointments and professional callings also provide opportunities to promote understanding. These include the law and criminal justice and community projects generally. Chaplains on campus at universities, and in prisons and hospitals will meet the full spectrum of religious allegiances. Friends at times become involved in political campaigns, particularly over human rights and environmental issues. Our allies may come from unexpected quarters. The Israel-Palestine controversies have made dialogue with the Jewish community painfully challenging, but in consequence it can become fruitful as well. Trustees of endowed Quaker funds large and small can play their role in promoting interfaith initiatives, and are seen to be pioneers in this field. Other Friends ranging from students to employers to carers may have opportunities to take or join initiatives with an interfaith dimension.

Case studies

The preparation of this document has been helped by a number of case studies. The following thoughts reflect some of their findings.

1. For Quakers, taking part in inter-faith groups is not problematic and indeed is felt to be a useful contribution to society. But what is rewarding is the feeling of spiritual enhancement from an established relationship. This is often dependent on the presence of inspirational individuals.
2. Friends' Meeting Houses are a useful resource as meeting places without obvious doctrinal connotations.
3. Collective events such as peace walks can be very productive.
4. There can be a peacemaking role for local Friends if a local community needs bridges between individual faith groups and either other groups or the wider world, as long as they have adequate training or experience.
5. The Government's PREVENT agenda and hence local authority interests in faith/interfaith matters are likely to seem relevant to Quakers, who may have conflict resolution skills.
6. Where confrontational politics (BNP, EDL) are present, the mediatory standpoint of Quakers can be a resource to defuse situations.
7. This all matters most in urban centres where there are significant mixed communities of inhabitants. In areas where the interested individuals are more dispersed, it is good in principle to pursue an inter-faith agenda, but this will be dependent for success on leadership and on the development of friendly and informed personal relationships.
8. One message for us all was to 'speak with pride and listen with respect'.

In one study we Quakers are seen to be in conflict with another faith community whose political and economic ethics we are deemed to be challenging. The resulting dynamics are proving a major test of the concepts of interfaith dialogue and encounter, in 'walking the talk'. Differences must be faced; interfaith is not about papering them over.

Have Quakers something prophetic to offer?

We are exhorted to be 'Patterns and examples' and to 'Let our lives speak, but what is the distinctive Quaker approach?

- Truth is the key testimony for Friends. Thus the search for Truth pervades the shared religious experience of Quakers in Britain and beyond as our primary testimony and purpose.
- In this many Friends openly admit to doubts, difficulties and vulnerabilities in our faith and practice, past and present. We are perhaps distinctive in being more open about this, yet within other faith traditions similar uncomfortable issues also clearly exist.
- Are we ready, then, to set ourselves a charted spiritual goal, based on our own experiences, of going beyond warm and loving relationships with those of all faiths whom we meet?
- Can we, by widening a spirit of trust, bring a deeper reality to the common human search for an understanding of the things that are eternal?

Resources and references

Sources of support, resources of knowledge and ideas for the use of local Meetings and Friends generally will be found under the Committee's website, www.quaker.org.uk/qccir; these include:

- **Case Studies** of Quaker interfaith involvement in various urban and rural environments
- **Local interfaith activities:** suggestions for events and projects
- **Contact details**, in particular websites, for interfaith and other organisations, including the Inter Faith Network for the UK, the Three Faiths Forum, World Congress of Faiths, INFORM, Quaker Universalists
- **Public events** such as Inter Faith Weeks, Remembrance Days, Holocaust Memorial Day, annual observances of world religions
- **Publications** including those of IFN, various Quaker authors, books on individual faith traditions (by authors from each tradition and by others), government publications such as Face-to-Face and Side-by-Side
- **Websites** of relevant initiatives (for example the Muslim scholars' site www.acommonword.com).
- **Local organisations:** Regional faith forums in England, academic and other centres.