

# Quaker insights in the context of ecological crisis

**Stuart Masters, Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre**

These nine reflective sessions explore our existing Advices and Queries and consider how readily they answer the imperative of the current climate emergency.



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### Introduction

*As Friends we commit ourselves to a way of worship which allows God to teach and transform us. We have found corporately that the Spirit, if rightly followed, will lead us into truth, unity and love: all our testimonies grow from this leading. (Advices & Queries - Introduction)*

In this article, (first published in The Friends Quarterly 2017, issue 2, and reproduced here with permission) I will draw upon traditional Quaker spiritual insights that can help Friends contribute to faith-based responses to the developing ecological crisis. My approach is quite general in scope, but I hope that these insights will prompt further, more focused exploration.

Nine themes are identified and, for each theme, I have offered an ecological reflection and a query. All these nine themes are familiar within everyday Quaker thinking and worship. However, in the context of this issue's concern for climate change, and its mitigation, they may be thought to have a particular resonance and relevance.

*We do not own the world, and its riches are not ours to dispose of at will. Show a loving consideration for all creatures, and seek to maintain the beauty and variety of the world. Work to ensure that our increasing power over nature is used responsibly, with reverence for life. Rejoice in the splendour of God's continuing creation (Advices & Queries - 42)*

The Quaker way points us to an inward source of guidance that can transform our lives and relationships. Inward spiritual growth leads to real change in the world. We are not entirely at the mercy of the systems of darkness that dominate the world as it currently is. This is not the end of the story. Our hope is that the vision of the peaceable kingdom can be realised in our lives and in the world. The creation is good; God loves and cares for it. We are one part of the creation, along with other animals and the rest of the natural world. All things are interconnected and interdependent and need to be in right relationship. We can play our part in the process of reconciliation that leads to Gospel Order<sup>(2)</sup>.

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(2) The danger for any spirit-inspired religion is individualism carried to excess. In the seventeenth century, this was seen amongst those called Ranters. Friends, too, ran this risk. What preserved them was the discovery of 'gospel-order', the setting up of meetings for church affairs where individual insight was tested against the insight of the gathered group. A series of meetings for church affairs, some local, some regional or national, had developed from 1654 onwards, though it was during the years 1667–1669 that George Fox journeyed throughout the country, creating from a series of ad hoc meetings a regular structure of monthly and quarterly meetings as part of a yearly meeting for the whole nation.

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October 2019 – Revelation: the promptings of love and truth

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*Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Trust them as the leadings of God whose Light shows us our darkness and brings us to new life. (Advices & Queries 1)*

Our faith as Friends is founded upon the conviction that within each person there is a source of guidance and transformation that, if attended to, reveals darkness and leads to new life. This Inward Teacher has the power to reveal the true order, beauty and harmony of creation and our rightful place within the complex web of life. It can also reveal the ways in which we find ourselves in bondage to a false spirit of greed, selfishness, cruelty, violence and destructiveness that frustrates and corrupts the true order, beauty and harmony of creation.

### Ecological Reflection

The revelations, or 'openings', experienced by early Friends seem to have convinced them that they were being brought into a new and harmonious relationship with the rest of creation. In this process, they felt that the wisdom and order of creation was revealed to them; they were brought into harmony with this wisdom and order and could appreciate the right use of 'the creatures' (created things). We affirm that such revelation continues, so this possibility remains available to us today.

### Query

Are you willing to allow yourself to be truly open to the guidance of your inward teacher, even when this disturbs and discomforts you by revealing your darkness?

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November 2019 – Convincement: guilty but forgiven

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*Be honest with yourself. What unpalatable truths might you be evading? When you recognise your shortcomings, do not let that discourage you. In worship together we can find the assurance of God's love and the strength to go on with renewed courage. (Advices & Queries 11)*

The process of convincement is an experience of being convicted of our darkness and sin and being consoled by divine love and forgiveness<sup>(1)</sup>. We are convicted of our bondage to the false spirit of greed, selfishness, cruelty, violence and destructiveness that wreaks havoc in the world. At the same time, we are consoled by our awareness of the unbounded love and forgiveness of God. We know that, although we are all limited and flawed creatures, implicated in the destruction and suffering of the creation, at the same time, every one of us is a precious and beloved children of God.

### Ecological Reflection

We are born into a world that is structured in a way that makes it far easier for us to go along with what is destructive and unjust than to do to what is right and just. This doesn't make us evil in ourselves but it does suggest that we are implicated, whether we like it or not, in systems and practices that oppress other people, cause suffering to animals and destroy the very eco-systems that support life itself. Our tradition indicates that, if we face up to this reality, and accept our complicity, the healing power of the Spirit will comfort us, and its Light will guide us towards another, more harmonious way.

### Query

Are you able to face up to both the reality of your darkness and the fact that you are forgiven as a beloved child of God? Are you willing to accept that you are caught between these two dimensions of your existence?

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(1) For Quakers in the seventeenth century, the term 'convincement' described an experience of being convicted of sin. A key function of the Light was to show a person their darkness. This needed to be dealt with before they could be brought to new life.

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December 2019 – Confession: telling it like it is

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*Speaking the unspeakable, admitting the shameful, to someone who can be trusted and who will accept you in love as you are, is enormously helpful.*  
(QF&P 12.01)

Although confession has never been a formalised practice among Friends, the value of a commitment to plain and truthful speaking is well-established. When the Spirit reveals our darkness to us, we need to be willing to express outwardly what we have found to be true inwardly. Public recognition of our personal and collective complicity with systems of violence, injustice, cruelty and destruction, helps us to face up to this predicament or ‘condition’ and join with others in discerning the most appropriate way to respond. Knowing that we are loved and forgiven might also lead us to express gratitude and joy.

### Ecological Reflection

Affluent people in Western societies have benefited greatly from the exploitation of other humans, animals and the natural world. These benefits are embedded in our daily lives, for example, through the things we buy, and what we eat and drink. Public recognition of the ways in which we are implicated in these forms of injustice represents a form of confession. It can help us to begin to make a break with destructive patterns of behaviour and seek alternative ways of living based on right relationship.

### Query

In response to God’s revelation, love and forgiveness, are you willing to publicly acknowledge your complicity with systems of violence, injustice, cruelty and destruction, and join with others in discerning a healthier and more just way of being?

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## **Quaker insights in the context of ecological crisis**

### **January 2020 – Repentance: choosing a different path**

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*Yield yourself and all your outward concerns to God's guidance so that you may find "the evil weakening in you and the good raised up".*  
(Advices & Queries 9)

Repentance involves a change of mind and a change of direction. When the Spirit reveals our darkness, we experience a change of mind (a new perception and a new understanding). When we respond to this by making an on-going commitment to following our inward guide, this implies a change in direction, as we begin to walk along a different path. It is not possible to do this in our own power. We all need the empowerment of the Spirit, along with the support and loving challenge of a community of discernment and mutual accountability.

### **Ecological Reflection**

In all sorts of ways, humans are not in right relationship with God, with each other or with the rest of creation. Currently, we constitute a disruptive and destructive element within this complex system of interconnected and interdependent parts. Because of this, there is an urgent need for people to experience a change of mind, and to take a different path. The wisdom of the Quaker way suggests that this can be achieved when we turn to the divine Spirit within us and seek its guidance. There are no quick fixes, because the path of right relationship requires patience, persistence and humility. We must turn away from the spirit of greed, violence and power and attend instead to the Spirit of love, peace and truth. We will then understand that all the parts of creation are our neighbours and we should love them as we love ourselves.

### **Query**

Are you willing to submit yourself to the guidance of your Inward Teacher? Are you truly open to the possibility of a change of mind? Are you willing to join with others in discerning the path of love, peace and truth which leads to right relationship?

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### February 2020 – Salvation: being saved from ourselves

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*The truth is that we are all hurt and need healing. There is a spiritual poverty among both rich and poor... If we are to be whole, we can no longer ignore the divisions created by idolising wealth, success and power. (QF&P 29.13)*

The Quaker way has tended to see salvation more in terms of building the kingdom of God on earth than the promise of heaven as a spiritual dwelling place after death. This involves seeing salvation as a process of being saved from the implications of our own darkness and ignorance. What are the key dimensions of this?

- **Bondage** – we find ourselves in bondage to social, economic and political systems and ideologies that lead us into a destructive relationship with each other, with other animals and with the rest of the natural world.
- **Liberation** – We need to be released from this bondage. The Spirit, acting as our Inward Teacher, has the capacity to break these bonds and release us from our dependence on the powers of death and destruction. This is an experience of liberation.

### Ecological Reflection

What does salvation mean in the context of ecological crisis? If our vision of salvation is understood in terms of Gospel Order<sup>(2)</sup> or right relationship, then individual salvation cannot be meaningfully separated from the well-being of the whole creation, understood as a complex system of interconnected and interdependent parts. If humanity currently functions as a disruptive and destructive element within creation, then salvation involves our liberation from systems, ideologies and motivations that lead to violence, hatred, cruelty, injustice, oppression and destructiveness. These fallen ways make life a 'hell on earth' for so many humans and other creatures and destroy the very ecosystems that support life on earth.

### Query

Are you aware of the impact that your lifestyle has on the well-being of other humans, other animals and the rest of the natural world? Are you willing to join with others in attending to the Spirit, as inward teacher, which has the power to liberate us from our bondage to systems of violence, injustice and destruction?

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(2) *Christ's direct government* among God's people by the Spirit was gospel order. The system Fox promoted was simply the *regimen* of eldership, meetings and group spiritual discernment that *created the space* for Christ to lead.

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### March 2020 – Testimony: doing the truth

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*The choice of the word 'testimony' is instructive. The testimonies are ways of behaving but are not ethical rules. They are matters of practice but imply doctrines. They refer to human society but are about God. Though often talked about they lack an authoritative formulation... (QF&P 20.18)*

Quaker testimony is a matter of 'doing the truth' as we have experienced it while attending to our Inward Teacher. Testimony is a fruit of the Spirit, and the way we feel compelled to act in response to the revelations or 'openings' we have received. It involves a commitment to consistency, so that our words and actions are bound seamlessly together. In her book *Testimony: Quakerism and Theological Ethics*, Rachel Muers characterises Quaker testimony in a number of ways, including the following:

- **Interruption and Refusal** – Testimony is an act of interruption and refusal. It is a double-negative because it acts as a denial of a lie.
- **Holy experiments** – Testimony is also positive, because in denying a lie, it also opens up space for new positive forms of practice or 'holy experiments'.
- **Communicates and Provokes** – Testimony pursues change by persuasion rather than coercion. Testimony communicates something and seeks to provoke a response in others.
- **Risky and Uncertain** – Testimony is concerned with faithfulness more than effectiveness. It is inherently risky because its impact is uncertain and may well be unsuccessful and misunderstood.

### Ecological Reflection

From an ecological perspective, there are many lies that need to be denied. For example, the idea that humans can own the rest of the creation, the idea that we are somehow separate from it and in control of it and the idea that there should be no limits to our wants and desires. We need to seek the guidance of our Inward Teacher to discern how the Spirit is calling us to respond to these lies. What kinds of 'holy experiments' are emerging that might communicate a new and healing relationship with the rest of creation, and provoke others to respond too?

### Query

What concerns is the Spirit prompting in you at this time? How might you seek to disengage from unhealthy and destructive ways of living and join with others in exploring 'holy experiments' that communicate new possibilities to those around you?

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**April 2020 – Gathered: A Community of Discernment**

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*As we enter with tender sympathy into the joys and sorrows of each other's lives, ready to give help and to receive it, our meeting can be a channel for God's love and forgiveness. (Advices & Queries 18)*

Although conviction has to begin with the individual, it inevitably leads us into community where the Kingdom of Heaven gathers us and catches us all, as in a net. The Quaker community is a community of discernment which aspires to offer a glimpse of Gospel Order and right relationship within the world. Our life together as a discerning community should be, in microcosm, what we envision for the whole creation. Some of the many dimensions of our corporate life together include being:

- **A community of revelation and healing** – When we come together in worship and discernment, we seek to be a community of revelation, where the Spirit shows us our darkness and brings healing and new life in a way that goes beyond our individual practice.
- **A Community of diversity** – When we come together in worship and discernment, we can benefit from a diversity of gifts, insights and experiences, that are not all available to us individually.
- **A community of experimentation** – When we come together in worship and discernment, guided by divine leadings, we can experiment with new ways of living, relating and cooperating. These should move us in the direction of right relationship and Gospel Order.

**Ecological Reflection**

Our experience of living within a dynamic and evolving community can help us to appreciate our interdependence and interconnections. We can come to understand the value of each individual member, what contribution they bring, and how the whole can be something more than a simple sum of its parts. This can act as a helpful ecological model from which to learn. Although there is a danger that community comes to define itself in ways that are divisive and excludes others, at its best, a community can offer a specific and situated vision of right relationship in action. This is a potentially counter-cultural witness within a society that places so much emphasis on individualism.

**Query**

In what ways does your Quaker community model right relationship based on diversity, cooperation and interdependence? How can we expand our conception of community so that it includes all living things?

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### May 2020 – Suffering: The Way of the Cross

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*Are you following Jesus' example of love in action? Are you learning from his life the reality and cost of obedience to God?*

(Advices & Queries 4)

*Our responsibilities to God and our neighbour may involve us in taking unpopular stands. (Advices & Queries 38)*

While the world remains caught between the way things are and the way they could be, and while the spirit of darkness holds sway, following God's way can have extremely costly consequences. For, when we become morally independent of the dominant powers, systems and ideologies of this world, and offer a different vision, we can become a threat to them. If we stand firm in our witness, like Jesus, we may end up being 'crucified' by the world. This is the way of the cross. Our founding mothers and fathers knew this only too well. It may be a deeply discomfiting prospect, but the possibility of suffering could be unavoidable in the context of war, injustice and ecological crisis.

### Ecological Reflection

There is a great deal of suffering within creation. Much of it seems unavoidable, but some of it is the direct result of human violence and greed. There is therefore no avoiding suffering from an ecological perspective. It may be that, in order to reduce the suffering created by human action, some people may feel called by a strong sense of compassion to suffer for the sake of liberation and right relationship. This is not an easy thing to face up to, and should not imply that suffering is inherently positive. However, the experience of our tradition suggests that costly witness and suffering can be associated with great joy, solidarity and a deep sense of divine accompaniment. The life and writings of James Nayler provide a powerful example of this.

### Query

Do you seek the guidance of the Spirit and the support of your community in order "to find a spiritual wholeness which encompasses suffering as well as thankfulness and joy" (Advices & Queries 10). How can we uphold each other so that we encounter costly witness with joy and steadfastness?

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**June 2020 – New Creation: The Peaceable Kingdom**

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*Friends, we are called into wholeness and into community, women and men alike, sharing the responsibilities God has given us, and assuming the leadership we are called to. We begin where we are, in our homes and meetings or churches, our work and communities, celebrating the realisation of the New Creation. (QF&P 23.40)*

The vision of the peaceable kingdom has always inspired Friends. Bit by bit, this kingdom can become a reality on earth as we die to the domination that darkness and evil has over us. When the seeds of greed, hatred, cruelty, violence and destruction are rooted out of the human heart, the institutions and ideologies that sustain this darkness and evil begin to lose their power, and the wholeness, well-being and justice of Gospel Order<sup>(2)</sup> can take their place. We are not in control of this process, but we can play our part. Like physical exercise, we have to start somewhere and build up our stamina. Right relationship and Gospel Order are not static concepts. Instead, they represent dynamic, on-going processes.

### **Ecological Reflection**

The vision of the peaceable kingdom is an ecological vision. Shalom or Gospel Order represents a state of harmony based on complex interdependence and right relationship. If all things are interconnected, then all actions based on compassion, healing and justice, however small, will have a positive impact. In the peaceable kingdom we take our place within this web of life; not above it, or in control of it, but as an essential part of it.

### **Query**

Are you able to keep the vision of the peaceable kingdom in mind, even though it seems so different from the way the world currently functions? Can you discern the seeds of the kingdom in your day-to-day life and interactions?

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(2) The danger for any spirit-inspired religion is individualism carried to excess. In the seventeenth century, this was seen amongst those called Ranters. Friends, too, ran this risk. What preserved them was the discovery of 'gospel-order', the setting up of meetings for church affairs where individual insight was tested against the insight of the gathered group. A series of meetings for church affairs, some local, some regional or national, had developed from 1654 onwards, though it was during the years 1667–1669 that George Fox journeyed throughout the country, creating from a series of ad hoc meetings a regular structure of monthly and quarterly meetings as part of a yearly meeting for the whole nation.

## Bournville Friends Meeting

*These sessions will take place from October 2019 to June 2020*

Held at Bournville Friends Meeting House on  
the second Wednesday morning of each month from 10.30 – 11.30

The meetings will begin with around 20 minutes of Quaker worship,  
and then a further 40 minutes exploring how the ecological insight for the day  
can help us in our daily lives.

Tea and coffee from 10.15 and again afterwards.

### EVERYONE WELCOME

Bournville Quaker Meeting House  
65 Linden Road, Birmingham, B30 1JT  
Telephone enquiries 0121 604 9584 or 0121 471 2155  
[bournville@centralenglandquakers.org.uk](mailto:bournville@centralenglandquakers.org.uk)

Bus routes 11, 27 and 48; trains (Cross City Line) to Bournville Station, half a mile  
from the Meeting House. Limited car parking on site with extra parking alongside  
Bournville Green.

