

Squeezing out the Spirit?

Stephen Feltham is troubled by a leaflet from Friends House

Before the recent general election Friends House produced a leaflet to help Quakers in Britain with their discernment. It asserted that 'our support for Quakers engaging with the election focuses on: climate change; nuclear weapons; forced migration; and economic inequality'.

Does it? Whilst these topics are undoubtedly high profile within the Religious Society of Friends I am confused by 'our support'. On whose authority? The document was overwhelmingly despondent about the present situation in this country and never failed to place the word 'government' in close proximity to the bleak picture it painted. It mentioned government nineteen times, God, faith and spirituality once each, but Spirit and religion not at all. Are we not a Religious Society?

A simple and obvious truth, for me, is that the UK is a wonderful place to live. So much so that there are hundreds of thousands of people trying to enter it every year. Yet all Quakers in Britain can do is publish a leaflet with a political bias that overlooks what we all seem to take for granted. Is it possible, perhaps, that the habit of Meeting for Worship has become just a routine and that the joy of life and munificence of the Divine is overlooked by our preoccupation with earthly matters and, in consequence, the nurture of our souls is neglected?

Regarding the four areas we were exhorted to focus on, all I have seen within Quakers is a plethora of words that have patently overlooked the Quaker testimony to simplicity. They are jam-packed with superlatives and emotional soundbites that defy and deny any reasoned logical exploration.

Recently I was advised by a 'lead' manager at Friends House that they represent and act only on the wishes of our Quaker membership, and that the way to achieve the enactment of our wishes is via Local Meeting minutes being passed to Area Meeting for further minute and thence onwards to Meeting for Sufferings to sanction and encourage the Friends House staff to expedite. I received this advice following a reprimand from Friends House staff for not following rules they hadn't published.

Should one, therefore, simply admire the leaflet and website produced as a result of following this process? Or are Friends House staff operating double standards and imposing bureaucracy on the rank and file whilst they get on with their own political agendas?

Has the Society (that cherishes equality) published the leaflet and set up the associated website via the same process that Friends House staff were so insistent that our special interest group observe? I am unaware of it. I have not seen any minute locally, in our Area Meeting or in any Meeting for Sufferings report. Whilst it is my perception that the political views of the majority of Friends may be to the left of the political divide, it is not universally so. Nonetheless, I am concerned that we are becoming a political movement that seems embarrassed by the concept of a spiritual ethos as the centre of our being.

Can it be said that the Quakerism one sees at Friends House is using the brand 'Quaker' and its associations to promote a particular liberal, social and political movement? I certainly have no problem with the concerns this movement addresses, or the good people who promote it, but I fear it has lost a connection with its Christian and spiritual foundation.

My concern with the withering of this connection between the spiritual and Quakers has led to me laying down tasks I was previously happy to discharge and to reduce my attendance at my Local Meeting. I am inexorably being driven to resigning altogether from Quakers – one of whose fastest growing special interest groups does not, it seems to me, believe in God!

It pains me to consider quitting Quakers. However, I am increasingly asking a question I believe more Friends will, sooner or later, have to consider: are we a Religious Society or some sort of movement? Is this what I joined? Is this what I really want? Am I still a member out of habit or because of renewed conviction?

Why has the Spirit been squeezed out of Quakers by social and political lobbying?

Stephen is from Bournemouth & Fordingbridge Meeting.