



William Penn

Lecture 1932

*Can  
Quakerism  
Speak  
to This  
Generation?*

*Henry T. Hodgkin*

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to This Generation?**

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The name of William Penn has been chosen because he was a Great Adventurer, who in fellowship with his friends started in his youth on the holy experiment of endeavoring “to live out the laws of Christ in every thought, and word, and deed,” that these might become the laws and habits of the State.

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# Can Quakerism Speak to This Generation?

In seventeenth century England, with its turmoil of political and religious currents, a movement took shape which undoubtedly had a message for that age and which succeeded in giving the message so that many heard and responded. That movement has persisted to the present day under the name of Quakerism. Its chief expression is in the organized life and individual activity of varied groups of persons mostly to be found in England and America. These groups are not so closely bound to one another as were the members of the original fellowship. They have seized upon and emphasized different aspects of the message. Their history, since those early days, has been marred by mistakes of one kind and another. They are meeting a situation in many respects different from that of three hundred years ago. Some of the truths to which their spiritual ancestors bore witness have been generally accepted and embodied in laws and in the social and religious life of our time. Other aspects of seventeenth century Quakerism make little if any appeal to this generation.

Without casting any doubt on the value of Quakerism as a factor in the religious, social and political development of the Anglo-Saxon peoples, it is nevertheless well to take stock of the present position. It has been suggested that the big contribution of this movement has already been made and that, since its principal concepts are now so widely approved, it has little, if any, justification for continuing its separate existence. In membership it is, all told, a very small body in

comparison with the great organizations of our modern religious and social life. Will not all that is of value today in its specific emphasis be better worked out through one or more of these larger and more influential associations? It is a day of unity and cooperation. By merging in the larger life of an inclusive Christian church the Society of Friends may set an example of courageous self-forgetfulness and, as an organization, prove that only by losing one's life can one truly gain it. Such a suggestion cannot fail to make a certain appeal to those who have set peace before them as one of the major objectives not only in personal living, but for the social order. Before either Friends or others conclude that such a course would be the highest kind of service at this time, we do well to propound the question which is the title of this evening's lecture: Can Quakerism Speak to This Generation?

The answer to the question falls naturally into three parts. We must first attempt some characterization of our generation and of the major problems with which it is confronted so far as they are related to the activity of such a socio-religious group as the Society of Friends. This done we should look into Quakerism as a movement in history, and see how far and in what directions its experience seems to touch upon the problems indicated by our survey. Our third inquiry concerns the present position of the Quaker movement, its strength and weakness—in short, its power effectively to translate into modern speech and relevant service those elements of the past faith and practice which are in themselves good and which seem to have significance and value for this generation. I cannot omit, finally, to

indicate certain matters to which, in the light of the treatment indicated, attention must be directed if interest is to be adequately met.

## **I**

To characterize a generation is indeed difficult. So many currents cross and recross that one can often truthfully describe a period in phrases which superficially contradict each other. In reviewing tendencies we soon discover that each one is already creating a reaction, which may not yet be "equal and opposite," but which may become so almost before one's words are read. With eyes open I take the chance of an emphatic denial of each point by some hearer or reader.

As I see it, this age is one of *disillusionment*. The process began in August, 1914, or at least it is from that date that it began to assume the proportions of a world-embracing movement or attitude. The generation which went into the world war believed in progress, in human betterment, in the steady evolutionary process. Many had come to believe in it as inevitable. No doubt there would be setbacks, but, by and large, humanity was moving on towards an era in which the greatest happiness of the greatest number would be ever more nearly achieved. Somehow good would be the final goal of ill. We might not be living in the best of all possible worlds, but that was our manifest destiny. Four years of hatred and slaughter and lying and the hardening of men's hearts was an experience enough to blow sky-high all easy optimisms. November, 1918, brought relief of strain indeed, but it found men sadly disillusioned.

Nor did the peace which followed suffice to cure the disease. How pathetically eager was the gaze of a broken society as month after month it watched the fashioning of the Versailles treaty! To few indeed could it seem other than a further verification of their fears. The after-war world was to be one in which old animosities remained and, new ones were created. While the machinery for harmonious development was indeed fashioned by the peace-makers, few could hope that the "last war" had been fought. The following years have, in large measure, added to the disillusionment. Widespread economic disaster, the increase of crime and lawlessness, the fear of Bolshevism on the one hand and Fascism on the other, unrest in many parts of the world—the failure of the League of Nations to achieve all that had been hoped from it, have combined to leave a sense of something like fatalism in many minds in place of the buoyant hopes with which the twentieth century opened. The breakdown of any sure sense of absolute moral values, the questioning of any meaning in life and the lack of any assurance of an existence beyond the grave open the way to reckless living, to a low standard of the dignity of man, to a cheapening of life and an increase in suicide. All these are signs of the prevailing mood of disillusion.

A second note of our time is that of *questioning*. By perpetual questioning men of science have opened the door to such a knowledge of nature and such added control of it as to make it seem that in every field the master-key is a question mark. Nothing is so assured or so sacred as to be exempt. The fetters of ancient assumptions must be broken whatever the consequences. To question boldly is to assert

your manhood. The more fundamental the question the better your claim to be a child of this age.

Thus it happens that the foundations on which previous generations have been building for centuries no longer seem to be secure. In the economic order we question individualism and the potency of *laissez faire*, the rights of property that are written into the constitution of almost every state, the presumption that man will only do his best work for private profit and the consequent development of a competitive system which crushes many to the wall.

In the international field men question the idea of absolute sovereignty of the State and its right to treat every question from the standpoint of national self-interest, the view that the desire for self-determination by any group is a sufficient reason for them to form an independent national unit, and not least the theory that war is inevitable and that there must constantly arise situations which can be solved in no other way. Is there indeed any real solution to be found in this way?

Within the nation questions are being asked concerning the democratic foundations on which most modern states are supposed to rest. How far is democracy a fact, and how far is it an illusion? Has it yet found its most appropriate and effective means of expression? Are we quite sure that it is the last word as a method of human government? May not a democracy be as intolerant and as imperialistic as an autocracy?



These questionings do not stop at the organization of our common life. The moral foundations on which character and the social good have been assumed to rest are by no means exempt. Is the difference between good and ill merely a relic of a past social necessity, a register of certain results which have been discovered by following a law no higher than that of expediency? Are we today in a world so different from the past that we are justified in, if not under the necessity of, revising radically these supposedly axiomatic moral distinctions? Is the duty of sexual continence from which our marriage law derives its sanction in any sense ultimate? Why should a man speak the truth if it pays better to tell a lie? If I must trample on the rights of others in my search for personal satisfaction, why should I not do so? To those brought up under the stern moral disciplines of the Puritan tradition such questioning causes disquiet, if not alarm.

The field of the spiritual is not exempt. To Friends, who base their view of life upon a direct experience of God in the soul, many of the questionings of the scientist and the historical critic seemed almost irrelevant. They left unchallenged the citadel of his faith. Our day has seen the end of that immunity. The psychologist has not hesitated to question religious experience itself. With fine phrases, such as auto-suggestion, or wish-fulfillment, he charms away the deepest conviction of men's lives. The "seed of God," to which Friends made so confident an appeal, is identified with the operation of a drug or the secretion of a ductless gland!

Whither are we drifting in this generation if we have come to the point of questioning even the right or the power of God to exist and to make Himself known in His own Universe?

All this means that the age is also one of *hesitation*. A man does not invest his funds unless he has some sense of security. He does not build his house while unsure of the foundations on which it is to rise. The sign-posts have been carried away in the hurricane, and we stand at the crossroads, uncertain which way to take. Shall it be communism, or socialism, or a modified capitalism? Shall it be a bold pacifism with drastic disarmament, or a timid forward step no bigger than that to which we are forced by economic necessity? Must we wait till science has demonstrated the reality of an unseen world of the spirit, or can we somehow justify a fresh venture of faith without waiting for the antecedent verifications?

While the age in which we live has been skeptical about the too confident assertions of the past, and turns from dogma with a gesture of disdain, perhaps it would not be too much to say that it is also just a little doubtful about the too confident denials which prove to have little nourishment for the soul and to lack the stimulus to high endeavour of which our age dimly perceives the need. Perhaps—perhaps—there is more in these discarded axioms than we thought. Would it be too intellectually indecent to hope so, or even to think so? As I see it, there is creeping into the mind of a doubting age a new doubt. It is beginning to be doubtful about its doubts.

Looking at this period in world-history more broadly I believe it is not misleading to say that we have reached the culmination of a process which has been at work for some four centuries. During at least that period we can watch the operations of forces which have relegated religion to an ever smaller place in the wide fields of human activity, until at

last we find many people, even inside the organized religious groups of western Europe and America, who accept without question the view that religion is concerned only with what we choose to call the spiritual side of our life. We are even met by the assumption that only a small proportion of people are religiously-minded, much as we may assume that only some are capable of finding any real satisfaction in higher mathematics. The fact that the process has reached a culmination is indicated by the attempt to organize a huge modern State upon the view that religion has no permanent place in human society and is indeed better dispensed with altogether—and this among people who have been long regarded as more susceptible than many to the appeals and sanctions of religion.

To give content to this interpretation of recent history let us look at several specific departments of our common life. It is not so long ago, as human history is reckoned, since kings and emperors claimed their right to govern in the name of the Deity, nor indeed since they were compelled to accept the word of the Christian Church, spoken through its titular head, as confirming or denying that right. The political development of almost every modern state shows evidence of the way in which religious issues have controlled political decisions and, of course, no one can claim that there are not many contemporary examples of the fact. Nevertheless, there would seem to be a steadily growing conviction that religion should be kept out of politics as far as possible. Many political situations are confused and embittered by the religious element. Would it not be a far safer course for mankind to pursue if we might frankly recognize that the

State must be absolutely neutral in religion, which means that it conducts its operations without any reference to religious ideas or sanctions on which it is assumed that there will always be sharp differences between the citizens? There may be little disposition to exclude religious men from public life, but is there not a growing belief that it is not fitting for them to adduce religious arguments for policies they favour and that so to do is usually to confuse the issue and to arouse passion where pure reason should guide?

Turning to the business world it scarcely needs to be argued that a similar process has been going on. The Middle Ages were concerned to regulate man's economic life by the application of ethical and religious principles to such questions as usury and exchange. They could not conceive of a development of industry that accepted the motto "business is business" as the equivalent of a repudiation of the moral law in this field. With the Protestant challenge to the authority of Rome, and still more with the growth of an industrialism which continually widens the gulf between employer and employed, the modern business man has come to assume that economic laws are as binding in their own field as are natural laws in theirs. What an impertinence, it seems to him, for religion to claim any right to speak when the sacred law of supply and demand is operating! Let the captain of industry or the trade unionist be as pious as he wants to be in his own home; but let him beware of invading the stock exchange or the counsels of the strike committee with his ancient platitudes. Here the weakest must go to the wall. The millionaire may delight to honour his God by

princely benefactions; but let him not bring that idea into the processes whereby his wealth is amassed.

Not very different is the story of the relation of religion to the world of science. It is not so very long since the Church was presuming to decide that the earth was the centre of our universe, round which the sun and stars rotated. Still less a time has elapsed since the processes by which scientists believe that living things have been developed were considered inadmissible to the reverent believer in the Creator. From interference in the search for truth about our universe the forces of religion have been driven in ignominious defeat, and few indeed would wish to see them renew the conflict. Yet it may be that both science and religion have lost more than we think because we are so slow in discovering just what each can bring to the other, because the mistakes of the past on both sides have led to the separation of these two which God had meant to be joined.

The long and painful controversies in the field of education have brought a similar disaster. By claiming too much and by claiming it in the wrong way the Churches seem, to many educators, to have forfeited their right to claim anything. Increasingly the child's education comes under the State and the State increasingly assumes that this means religious neutrality, often construed as indifference to all religion. To add a few courses, to establish Sunday Schools or special sectarian schools which care for some children is felt by many to be a very inadequate solution. Yet it seems the only possible one in the light of this history. We have not discussed yet how religion can be so woven into the whole educational process as to give a sense of absolute values, an

inner discipline, a reverent and worshipful spirit, a joyous confidence in the goodness of God without raising again issues which have so often been fought in a most unChristian way, and without being unfair to the personality of the growing child.

Passing in review these fields of human activity we get nearer and nearer to the citadel itself. The outworks one by one give way until we are faced in our generation with a new and confident claim, namely, that in the building up of individual character religion is needless and even dangerous. Those psychologists who are continually bringing to our attention the power of the human mind, under right guidance, to face out its own repressions and complexes very often fear greatly the upsetting influence of religion. They do not all go so far as to exclude religion as a constructive factor, on occasion, in character formation, but they limit its field very severely and on the whole tend to fear rather than to welcome the Christian minister as a helper in the field of personal adjustment. I need not remind you that many go farther than this and frankly dismiss all that we have been calling religious experience as auto-suggestion and what not. Here then we reach a climax that ought surely to make us sit up and take notice. If religion is to be forced out of the field which of all others it has claimed for its own, what is left for us to expect in regard to the future of the faith?

What R. H. Tawney has so finely said in respect of the economic situation can, *mutatis mutandis*, be said of each of the fields we have glanced at. Speaking of the revolution caused by “the abdication of the Christian Churches from the

departments of economic conduct and social theory long claimed as their province,” he says:

“The elements which combined to produce that revolution are too numerous to be summarized in any neat formula. But side by side with the expansion of trade and the rise of new classes to political power, there was a further cause, which, if not the most conspicuous, was not the least fundamental. It was the contraction of the territory within which the spirit of religion was supposed to run.... Religion (was) converted from the keystone which holds together the social edifice into one department within it, and the idea of a rule of right (was) replaced by economic expediency as the arbiter of policy and the criterion of conduct. From a spiritual being, who, in order to survive, must devote a reasonable attention to economic interests, man seems sometimes to have become an economic animal, who will be prudent nevertheless, if he takes due precautions to secure his spiritual wellbeing....

“The conflict between religion and those natural economic ambitions, which the thought of an earlier age had regarded with suspicion, is suspended by a truce which divides the life of mankind between them. The former takes as its province the individual soul, the latter the intercourse of man with his fellows in the activities of business and the affairs of society. Provided each keeps to his own territory, peace is assured. They cannot collide for they never meet.”<sup>1</sup>

In politics, in business, in science, in education, in family and social relations, and now in the holy of holies of the human soul religion has met a challenge. The challenge has been the more telling because organized religion has repeatedly made the wrong approach in these fields, has assumed too much and has chosen the weaker ground on which to stand. Yet when we review the entire story, must we not grant that, in each of these fields, we are the less able to function constructively because religion has so often been adulterated by the world, because it has so seldom established the right kind of relationship with the world and because where there should have been close cooperation there has been warfare or a kind of armed neutrality? I conceive that we have now reached the culmination of a process which it is easier to explain than to justify, to define than to arrest. If religion is in truth dangerous or irrelevant as it might seek again to enter these fields, had we not better accept the fact and readjust our thinking thereto?

And yet I believe that anyone who has his ear to the ground in this generation will not fail also to catch an undercurrent of doubt if not of dismay. All does not seem to be well. Are we accepting what really amounts to the surgical operation of cutting out the heart? When the process is complete will any life-blood flow? Will life be any longer worth living? In the deepest sense will humanity have committed suicide? It seems to me that our generation stands in some alarm and wonder before a situation which has arisen it knows not how, unable to retrace its steps, not indeed wishing to return to old controversies, but as little knowing how to move forward.



Before such a situation is the faith of our Quaker forefathers impotent? Can we discover any place where the things they saw so clearly may yet shine as beacons to light the onward march of a disillusioned, questioning, hesitant age which may well be a turning point in its spiritual history?

## ***II***

Three elements in the early Quaker movement may be singled out and briefly analysed in this connection. In separating them I am aware that I am open to criticism because the whole is somehow greater than the sum of all the parts, and we cannot really understand such a movement by looking at its several aspects one by one. It is not possible to say I will choose this and refuse that. The seamless garment of our faith lies before us to wear or to discard. Yet to appreciate its beauty we may discourse upon its texture, its colour and its form, remembering that each is but one factor in producing the total sense of satisfaction which the garment yields.

It is well known to such an audience as this that George Fox early discovered a great body of men and women who were described by the general term Seekers. To them his message came with all the force of an authoritative word of God. Here was one who after much tribulation had passed into the company of the finders and could say with confidence, "This I knew experimentally." There seems to be little if any place for hesitation in Fox's preaching and writing, and the same may be said of that interesting body of prophetic souls who were called "The First Publishers of Truth." In their generation there were, of course, many of the over-confident

“professors,” and with these Friends were ever ready to argue. But the groups from whom they drew most largely were the questioners, the uncertain, those who had found no guidance among the dogmatists of their day.

What was it about the message or the messengers which made it possible for Friends to win adherents among this multitude of Seekers? There could be no doubt about their sincerity, and that must certainly have commended their message when so many in those days lacked this essential quality. But we cannot read the records of the day without appreciating the sincerity of some who were absolutely opposed to the Quakers. Sincerity alone cannot give the answer, though it is part of it.

Between the Quaker and most of the contemporary leaders a great gulf lay. To the latter the grounds for confidence were to be discovered in the text of Scripture, in the creedal formulations of the past, in the majesty of a great institution, in the completeness of reasoning by which these were expounded and defended. It would be entirely unfair to that generation to assume that it was only among the Friends that a different ground of confidence was found. Yet this movement stands out, amidst much formalism and externality for a religion quite frankly appealing to “that of God in all men” and basing its message and its methods boldly on the confidence that what they had seen all could see. While by no means neglecting the value of the Scriptures, the voice of the Church and the power of reason as accessories, Friends started at the centre, the point from which all true theology, inspiration and church fellowship

must start—God as a living reality apprehended by the spirit of man.

It is well known that this stupendous assertion has often been made in such a way that men have been led away into extremes of what they took for divine inspiration, but what the sober judgment of spiritually minded folk has classed as fanaticism or even insanity. The Society of Friends early saw this danger through a few bitter lessons and recognized that “the spirit of the prophets must be subject to the prophets.” But somehow they were able in the first generation to achieve this difficult result without chaining that spirit—a phenomenon so closely associated with the growth of organization as to be almost ranked as inevitable.

This joyous confidence, with its ringing note of sincerity and simplicity, leading to an intimate and glowing fellowship among those who had tasted for themselves of the grace of God, gave freshness and force to the movement. It was highly contagious. Those who were wearying of doubts and hesitations, yet repelled by the arguments of the schools and not to be won by the dogmatism of the “professors,” found the note to which they could respond with a full heart. They too became Finders and entered into the expanding Fellowship.

While the circumstances of today, with our scientific outlook, may not afford a very close parallel, I think the closing words of A. Stanley Eddington’s Swarthmore lecture are not inappropriate here as a help in making a modern application.

“Rejection of creed is not inconsistent with being possessed by a living belief. We have no creed in science, but we are not lukewarm in our beliefs. The belief is not that all the knowledge of the universe that we hold so enthusiastically will survive in the letter; but a sureness that we are on the road. If our so-called facts are changing shadows, they are shadows cast by the light of constant truth. So too in religion we are repelled by that confident theological doctrine which has settled for all generations just how the spiritual world is worked; but we need not turn aside from the measure of light that comes into our experience showing us a way through the unseen world.

“Religion for the conscientious seeker is not all a matter of doubt and self-questionings. There is a kind of sureness which is very different from cocksureness.”

The words I have quoted also form a fitting transition to my next point. The early Friends liked to think that in their experience that of First Century Christianity was being recaptured. One of the striking movements of our own day uses this conception as one means of describing itself. To those who have studied religion from an historical point of view, the simple return to the primitive seems at least dangerous and perhaps perverse. What of the long gains slowly acquired as generation after generation of devout learned men have built up theologies against destructive tendencies of thought, have elaborated the culture of the

Christian faith, and left behind the enriching record of saintly lives? Are all these to be carelessly discarded? Some Quaker utterances of the Seventeenth Century show little if any sense of historical values, and perhaps few saw that in the essence of the new message lay a conviction which actually ran counter to the tendency to turn backward.

For Fox and his followers had rediscovered what has been called the doctrine of the Spirit,—long embedded in ancient creeds but seldom made to march in the programme of organized Christianity. To them this was not a “notion” or book-knowledge: they submitted their lives to the Spirit’s direction and were led into amazing adventures, rose to unexpected situations, discovered opportunities under the most unlikely conditions. But that was not all. The meeting for worship became a shared experience of divine guidance. The affairs of the Church were discussed with the confidence that the same leadership would be recognized by all sensitized souls and so no votes were needed or cast. A genuine belief in a living divine Spirit applied fearlessly cannot work out in a static religion. There is ever more to learn. New truths will unfold, new beauty appear, new duties emerge, as men accept fearlessly the implications of this truth. “We have a confidence,” says Eddington, “that we are on the road.” That kind of confidence is liberating. It expands the spirit of man. Who knows what may come next? Old forms and phrases may pass, old customs fall into disuse, new and strange and unlikely ways may be found for new truth to break out. ‘But he who has been “baptized into this spirit” “goes gaily in the dark,” for

*“God fulfills Himself in many ways*

*Lest one good custom should corrupt the world."*

Although the full implications of the position have only very slowly revealed themselves, the early Friends were showing the way not to the discarding of history, but to a method of treating it which is radically different from the method used by most of their contemporaries. For the latter the appeal was back to the printed page and the concrete statement. For the former the gaze was forward to the new insights which were bound to come to a group of Spirit-led persons. There was no question among the Friends of the supreme place of Jesus in history, but they visualized an expanding appreciation and an ever more thorough application of all that He was and stood for. In the past men had often missed the way and here we must retrace our steps. But the final answer could not be found in simply going back. Essentially Quakerism was a religion of abounding hope and rich promise. That hope grew out of the renewed experience of divine leading by the individual and by companies of Friends. It determined their very organization. It came as a summons to many then. Need we doubt that the same truth held in something like the same way would have like effects today?

The other element which seems appropriate for treatment is the way in which Friends applied religion to life. Seventeenth Century England was torn by vehement religious controversy, all the more bitter because politics and religion could not be separated in the minds of most contestants. When religion is felt to be the most vital of all human problems it is easy to see how it will claim authority in every field—a curiously opposite temper from that of

today. The religiously indifferent were of course many, but even they were almost forced by the violence of their opponents' convictions to ally themselves with religious forces and to use religious arguments in seeking political ends. Some religious devotees, seeing the danger, proclaimed a gospel of complete separation from the world. The spiritual insight of Quakers is nowhere more evident than in their careful avoidance of both extremes: complete separation on the one hand, or identification of religion and politics on the other. Theirs was a religion for life, to be applied to the treatment of prisoners and Indians, in claiming political rights, seeking to express itself, under the right conditions, but only so, in the government of a State.

What we have to note is the way chosen for making the great assertion that no part of life is to be looked upon as "secular." They did not try to win by secrecy or compromise. Where others concealed their breach of the Conventicle Act, Friends just continued meeting in their accustomed places till the prison cells were choked with them. Instead of waiting till the time seemed opportune they went forward finding ways of expressing their convictions till the chance came to control the developing colony of Pennsylvania—and then they resisted the temptation, to which so many had succumbed, of using their power to persecute and coerce. In claiming freedom of speech and conscience, in the war against slavery, and in the war against war, not to mention the stand for honesty in trade and the championing of many oppressed groups, Friends have repeatedly given evidence of the sincerity of their claim that religion is relevant to *all*

life—a claim which I have suggested is made with less and less confidence even by religious people today.

It is important that we should realize that for our spiritual forefathers this claim grew right out of the central insights of the faith. “That of God in all men” was to them a doctrine which concerned the whole of life, and my view is that the reality of the spiritual guidance which they claimed to have received is evidenced in part by their avoidance of many of the wrong methods which have been chosen by religion when it has laid claim to secular authority. It remains for this generation to discover how that assertion can be worked out today.

When so many mistaken claims have been made by organized religion to dominate scientific thought, political life, the education of the child and so forth, no new claim will be admitted for religion to reenter any of these fields unless it can be made as a constructive contribution in harmony with the highest ends envisaged for that line of human pursuit and adding something which would be otherwise lacking. Moreover, it must rely upon the kind of inner and self-evidencing authority to which Friends have appealed, awakening a witness within and not upon a code supported by ancient tradition alone. The Quaker experience of nearly 300 years ago provides a fruitful mine wherein to work as we seek to quarry this rich ore.

### ***III***

We have now to try very honestly to examine contemporary Quakerism, from the point of view of its fitness adequately



to bring to this generation any such message of power and relevance as our forefathers brought to theirs. A religious leader of another persuasion commented the other day, in introducing me to a group of ministers, on the growing mutual understanding and tolerance among the churches, and added that one great gain was that many were, in this atmosphere, better able than before to appreciate the great values of the Society of Friends. Are we meeting, as we might, the new readiness to receive? We might also ask ourselves whether we are as eager to learn from others as we expect them and even find them to be, to learn from us? But it is to the former query that we have now to address ourselves.

I am bound to confess that as I look 'round the Society of Friends, which I love as my own mother, I am filled with a deep misgiving. I wonder whether we are not letting the day of our visitation pass by. I see only here and there signs that we are even aware of what is happening around us, and where we may help in a situation so hopeful yet so perilous. We are busy hither and thither—but do we care to do the one thing needful? Do we even see what it is? There are so many things we can do well enough that maybe we are not girding our loins to do supremely well the supremely important thing.

In the first place, we do not speak with one voice. We have so many elements, not only those which are differently organized, but within each group we go off on different lines and too often even criticize one another. We want no artificial unison, but the deeper we get to really central things the deeper will be the harmonies that emerge.

We are too self-conscious as a group, thinking what others think of us—far too sensitive to their good opinion. Yet we lack that deeper group consciousness in which we become so absorbed in the task and in the greatness of the revelation that we think little, if at all, of either praise or blame.

We are lamentably feeble in expression by word. A nervous fear of words possesses us too often, which really finds its source in the fact that we have not disciplined our minds to think clearly—are content with mistiness as if that were the same as mysticism, and so cannot stand before thinking people with a clear and ringing word well thought through and well expressed.

Too large a proportion of our thought seems to be needed for keeping the machine moving and for settling internal problems, leaving too little free energy for getting out into the world about us with a word to deliver. Were there a deeper passion to serve, more concerns would be developed for missionary activity at home and abroad, and we should surely find that young people were far more deeply interested in our meetings for discipline if they were frequently handling such concerns.

Perhaps the surest way to develop such concerns would be through a better knowledge of, and a deeper insight into, the needs of our time, and here I cannot think Friends have shown any preeminence. Too often they have left it to others to make really penetrating analyses of need, whereas it was just that power to see behind the superficial wants to the deeper needs which gave an almost uncanny power to the first generation of Friends.

These are some of the directions of our present weakness, but perhaps two should be singled out which, in a sense, include others. First, the lack of great experiences of God of the kind that uproot men and women from easy lives, fill them with a great urge, create out of even common folk prophets of the Lord. That is one lack, and the other is that of the disciplining of all life to a great end, which comes naturally to those who see and accept such an end, but which can never be brought about by regulations and admonitions. An undisciplined life and an undisciplined group are alike doomed to inefficiency in spiritual not less than in intellectual and in physical activities.

There are many hopeful elements, there is much well-directed activity, there are some great and inspiring personalities among us. But can we with any confidence say that the Society of Friends is girding up its loins to play worthily its part in a day when such great issues are being thought out and fought out?

Before I close I feel like indicating one or two lines along which Friends may look for re-enforcement, by no means expecting them to be exhaustive but rather illustrative of much that must be left unsaid. Friends of today may yet meet, in a large way, the needs of today: but our power to do so must first come through an inner awakening which, if it be deep enough, will find its fit expression in such corporate as well as individual changes as may be needed to make us the channel of new life to many.

We need then what I would call a penetrative consciousness of the condition of our time. By this I mean not simply a

knowledge of the inner currents and forces which move men today, but that kind of awareness of spirit which grips us more completely than mere knowledge can, the sense that we are part of the movement we observe, that it has entered into us and we into it, so that, in John Woolman's telling phrase, we can no longer consider ourselves "to be distinct and separate human beings." And this conscious partnership with the inner struggle of humanity needs to be so penetrating that we are not simply swayed by the passing emotions and passions and enthusiasm of our age, but that we feel what I may call the ground-swell, that we may hear the motif as the men and women around us search for what they themselves cannot express. They may seem to be satisfied with this or that offered solution.

Friends need to realize that, appearances notwithstanding, short-cut solutions will not have permanent value. We need that spiritual sensitiveness which opens the way to the secret places of personal and social need. That many of the early Friends had this penetrative consciousness cannot be denied. Did they not get it because they knew how to be silent before God?

The experience I speak of leads on to the development of creative imagination—a second need in our generation. Friends saw in other men hidden possibilities. They would not class a man as a criminal or as hopeless. The seed of God in him might be awakened into an active life. Where others saw only a thing to be spurned, Friends saw a brother to be cherished. It was this use of the imagination under the touch of love which made them so creative. We need this same imagination today, not only in relation to persons but in

relation to contemporary movements. To these we too often bring the yard-stick of our own pet ideas and orthodoxies. This is where organized religion has repeatedly missed the mark. It is easy to see today that the hand of God has been guiding men to search ever more deeply into the secrets of the universe. Everyone will recognize that the quest for truth is parallel to the quest for goodness and by no means to be condemned. But there was a generation of religious people who feared it as men fear the devil. It upset their little theories and they missed the big thing in some of the minor results. In looking back even to such a terrible series of events as the French Revolution, we can see that certain great and true ideas were breaking the crust of old traditions and abuses, and we can scarcely doubt, if we believe in God in history at all, that He used that outbreak to do something great for human society.

How much harder it is to judge contemporary movements! The evil in them blinds us to their great messages to the conscience of humanity. We use an orthodox yard-stick and condemn a movement that is atheistic, when perhaps a more creative imagination would help us to hear the passionate cry for social justice,—to recognize that we ourselves no less stand condemned by some of the eternal standards of righteousness which can never be repealed and that there is but one ultimate source of humanity's cry for rightness in man's treatment of his fellow-man, as there is but one source of the passion for truth. Years after the stress is over the Church may be fain to say, "surely God was in this movement but I knew it not," but then its chance to act creatively towards it or even with it may have passed by.

Further, Friends need to exercise a more dynamic pacifism. Smugly content that we are not as other men are,—that Friends have not soiled their hands with the horrors of war—we seem to be on the verge of forgetting that all the great causes of God and humanity must be fought for in the market place where men rub shoulders with one another, and by persons who will take off their coats and get right in on the job. Our pacifism degenerates too quickly into passivism—a very mean kind of substitute.

If we believe that the Spirit of life and truth can use us to do a really big piece of work today we have to make fresh discoveries in what it means to be saviours. To Jesus it meant not evading the issue or choosing the easier place in which to witness for the truth. It meant a challenge in the very citadel of vested interests, entrenched prejudice. It meant utterances which were sure not to pass unnoticed, until at last, unarmed and in utter dependence on the might of God, which is the might of Love, He fell before the combined powers of an outraged social and political and religious order. Have we a fraction of that courage today? The needs of our generation can only be met through men and women of courage, and that must be for us the courage of love—dynamic pacifism. It may have to express itself in a new identification with unpopular and despised groups: it may have to work out in experiments in our economic order that have too large an element of risk for any but for men of faith: it may seem not less futile than it seemed for Jesus to pit His lone self against Jewish hierarchy or Roman legionary. But a vindication of the great way forward for humanity is long overdue,—the vicious circle waits to be

broken by some divine madness, the birthright of our society summons us to think and to feel our way into present need, to bring to it creative imagination, to crown such insights as may be given us by the fearless deed.

The state of the world calls for the prophet who, seeing farther into things than the average man, issues his warning and his promise with no uncertain voice. It calls no less for the pioneer who, throwing aside encumbrances, will take up the task and venture forth into the unknown when others fear to move, choosing security and prudently hoping someone else will go first. And it needs also the plodder who, hearing the prophet's call and following the pioneer's lead, will go on, day in and day out, looking neither for reward nor recognition, knowing that quick returns are not to be expected, but in whose heart shine faith to nerve and hope to guide and love to beautify the daily round of faithful service.

If our Society might today furnish persons of each of these types for the Great Society of which we are a part, if they might bring with them the undying fire of a vital and expanding faith in God, if they might accept freely all the disciplines of serving in this age, then I can see a rebirth of Quakerism that would astonish us. For I believe there are rich untapped possibilities in our Society: powers are slumbering that need to be awakened by the urgency and interest of the big event, young people are devoting to business or pleasure energies that might be released for far bigger things could they but see how great a thing it is to live for the eternal purposes. Yearnings and aspirations are in the air that find no satisfactions in the trivial and temporary. Our

generation needs to arise to the greatness of its spiritual heritage and its social task.

Would to God a reborn Quakerism might help it to gird itself for worthy activities—to cleanse public life, to deal constructively with crime, to begin to educate the young for life and not merely to make a living, to fashion the community of nations into a real family, to give the worker satisfaction in his work, to fill leisure with creative and joyous activity, to eliminate class struggles by fundamental reconstruction in industry, to drive out the demon of race pride, and its attendant ills, to lift sex relations to the plane of noble companionship, to bring into all our common life the liberating sense of God as the fulfiller of everything that is best in each of us, so that there might be no more secular and religious.

In such fields as these there is scope for all that we can bring. Our spiritual ancestors brought their best to like tasks. They did so because life for them was a complete whole, and out of their transforming experience of God grew a passion to serve their generation. To give their message meant long and arduous journeys, facing fierce opposition, long prison sentences in noisome gaols, scourging in public, in some cases death. They did not turn back. Their imperishable records are a summons to us. To discuss our past or to indulge a bright vision of our future is not enough. To equip ourselves to serve and to shape our Society to become an instrument in God's hands—this is our task.

*“Lord, not for light in darkness do we pray,  
Not that the veil be lifted from our eyes,*



*Nor that the slow ascension of our day  
Be otherwise.*

*“Not for a clearer vision of the things  
Whereof the fashioning shall make us great,  
Not for remission of the peril and the stings  
Of time and fate.*

*“Grant us the will to fashion as we feel,  
Grant us the strength to labour as we know,  
Grant us the purpose, ribbed and edged with steel,  
To strike the blow.*

*“Knowledge we ask not—knowledge thou hast lent,  
But Lord, the will—there lies our bitter need,  
Give us to build above the deep intent  
The deed, the deed.”*

# Notes

1. *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, Tawney, pp. 278ff.

## About the Author

Henry Hodgkin (1877-1933) was a medical doctor and a British Quaker missionary who, in the course of his 55-year life, co-founded the West China Union University in Chengdu, co-founded and led the first Christian pacifist movement, the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, and founded the Pendle Hill Quaker meeting and training center, in Wallingford, Pennsylvania.

In 1929 Henry Hodgkin was called to launch the Quaker religious and social meeting centre of Pendle Hill near Philadelphia (Pendle Hill being the name of the Lancashire hill where George Fox, the inspirator of Quakerism, had his founding vision). Historian Douglas Gwyn has shown Henry Hodgkin's determining role, contributing his spiritual depth and his social concern to the drafting of the meeting centre's vision: Pendle Hill's early vision was to be "a vital center of spiritual culture and as a place for training leaders."

In 1929, Henry Hodgkin gathered a dozen leaders to discern the direction for this new center and four key focus areas were chosen as a result: House of Rest, a place of peace and deep quiet; School of the Prophets, a place to be grounded in a few well-chosen areas rather than teaching on many interesting topics; Laboratory of Ideas, a place to test beliefs in practice; and Fellowship 'Round Christ among students and staff.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry\\_Hodgkin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Hodgkin)

## About the Lectures

The William Penn Lectures started as a ministry of the Young Friends' Movement of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. In the beginning of the last century, "Young Friends" was the community of young adults from both the Hicksite and the Orthodox Philadelphia Yearly Meetings, which reunited in 1955. The Young Friends Movement began the lecture series "for the purpose of closer fellowship; for the strengthening by such association and the interchange of experience, of loyalty to the ideals of the Society of Friends; and for the preparation by such common ideals for more effective work through the Society of Friends for the growth of the Kingdom of God on Earth." The name of William Penn was chosen because the Young Friends Movement found Penn to be "a Great Adventurer, who in fellowship with his friends started in his youth on the holy experiment of endeavoring 'To live out the laws of Christ in every thought, and word, and deed; and that these might become the laws and habits of the State.'"

The first run of William Penn Lectures were given between 1916 and 1966, and are warmly remembered by Friends who attended them as occasions to look forward to for fellowship with our community, inspiration, and a challenge to live into our faith. The lectures were published by the Book Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting has granted Pendle Hill and Quaker Heron Press permission to reproduce the lectures as free ebooks.

Although it was [announced](#) in 1960 that the series would be discontinued several lectures were published in the early '60s. It appears that the lectures given between 1923 and 1931 were never published. If we come upon manuscripts of these lectures, we hope to publish them in future.

In 2010, the Young Adult Friends of PYM revived the series, officially launching the second run of the William Penn Lectures in 2011. [The series was renamed](#) the *Seeking Faithfulness* series in 2016, as part of the Young Adult Friends of PYM's concern for dismantling racism within the yearly meeting and the wider society. It no longer felt rightly ordered to have a major event named after a slaveholder. The [Seeking Faithfulness](#) series is hosted by the Young Adult Friends for the benefit of the whole yearly meeting community, and invites a Friend to challenge us all to explore new ways to practice our Quaker faith. The Seeking Faithfulness series seeks to nourish our spiritual lives and call us to faithful witness in our communities and throughout the world.