

BUILDING INTERFAITH UNDERSTANDING:

Truth, neighbourliness and spirituality – Quaker testimonies in an age of diversity

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My lecture starts with a warm thank you to the organisers of this Challenges for Our Time series for calling me from Coventry, a city that connects with this evening in two ways – fire and faith. Coventry is an example of rebuilding after destruction by fire – and not just of rebuilding but of turning the destruction on its head as a basis for generating peace and reconciliation and Coventry's symbol of the phoenix rising from the ashes is Jordans symbol too. Coventry, with its increasingly diverse post war settlement, has over the past 30 years given me insights into some of its many faith communities and has introduced me to initiatives for mutual understanding

and respect – initiatives taken by the City Council, the Herbert (our museum and art gallery), and by individuals and voluntary organisations.

Coventry and Jordans are united by a history of gatherings for Quaker worship from the 17th century. It was in Coventry that Quakers' founder, George Fox, was disillusioned by the anger with which a local clergyman reacted when, during a theological conversation, George accidentally trod on one of his flower beds.

Before I go further I owe you an indication of how my life connects to the subject of interfaith understanding. My parents were Anglican and my longest standing friends from a different background are Jewish. My family by marriage is Hindu, from Punjab in north India, and I have been fortunate too in having Bahai, Muslim and Zoroastrian friends and the benefit of conversations with students from a variety of African and both east and south-east Asian backgrounds. My academic research (into the transmission and adaptation of religious culture) has involved ethnographic fieldwork

among a range of Christian, Hindu and Sikh communities. ¹I have graduate students whose fieldwork focuses on Islamic education.

Also at the outset I need to give a warning and an apology. I will not be providing stereotypes or interesting details to convey an impression of other faiths, but attempting to uncover processes and to suggest possible steps. A blander lecture would have been easier, pointing to consensus between „religions, finding that they converge in emphasising truth or love, and that Quaker testimonies add to the consensus. This exercise has its place but we also need to move out of a comfort zone. Any examples I give, that are linked to particular religious or cultural groupings, are not meant to cause offence but to illustrate challenge and complexity. I could well have taken instances from other communities to make similar points.

October 9th

Greetings to Hindu friends who are, this year, celebrating Dassehra today, the festival marking the god-king Rama's defeat of the demon king of Lanka, as told in the Ramayana epic and re-enacted each year in public

¹See for example Jackson, R. and Nesbitt, E. (1993) *Hindu Children in Britain* (Stoke on Trent: Trentham), Nesbitt, E. (2000) *The Religious Lives of Sikh Children: A Coventry based study* (Community Religions Project, University of Leeds), Nesbitt, E. (2004) *Intercultural Education: Ethnographic and religious approaches* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press) and Nesbitt, E. (2005) *A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

spaces in India. A further look at October 9th discloses, probably in common with most other days of the year, the annual reminders of encounters between members of different societies in previous centuries – encounters in the shape of exploration, infiltration, conquest, and conversion, mission and martyrdom. 1750 years ago (258CE) St Denis was beheaded on the martyr's mount, Montmartre, in Paris, after angering pagan priests by his persistence in winning converts to Christianity. (I am using CE – Common Era – rather than AD, as this is the religiously neutral convention for dating of our era.)

1005 years ago (in 1003 CE) Leif Erikson landed in North America (Newfoundland), the first European known to have done so. October 9th is also the day of the 16th century Spaniard, St Louis Bertrand, who was responsible for making Christians of thousands of indigenous people, especially in Colombia and Panama. Such encounters, between Christians and non-Christians and often between Europeans and non-Europeans – on the non-Christian ground and the Christian terms - provide part of the historical background for our encounters in 2008. Historic encounters of these types also remind us of levels of energy and commitment (hopefully not to the point of being martyred) that are called for by our contemporary initiatives to nurture respectful, fruitful understanding between members of different faith communities.

Faith and religion

The key terms, faith and religion, will repay attention before we proceed further. The word faith is synonymous with confidence, trust and optimism. Faith is also often used interchangeably with religion, both in the sense of a faith community - those who share a religious designation such as Buddhist – and in the sense of a cluster of beliefs about a divine principle or underlying reality. Religion encompasses individuals searches for truth, the formulation of theology, and so truth claims such as: there is one God. Religion (certainly in its earlier Latin form) implies duty, and it is experienced too as a source of solace, insight, inspiration and vision, and indeed as a framework for spirituality. As with faith, religion is a word used in everyday speech to mean people connected by history, norms and rituals – people who often share stereotypes of others. So interfaith understanding involves understanding both ideas and communities.

Phillip Hammond (a sociologist) wrote of religion as being both a primary and a secondary identification. ²Is our religion primary i.e. what we have been born into or secondary i.e. what we have chosen? Most UK Quakers (in my experience) are people who have chosen to be Quakers.

²Hammond, P. (1988) Religion and the Persistence of Identity *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 27 (1) pp. 1-11.

Even those of us who were born into Quaker families may have chosen not to change our allegiance or have chosen to return to it. For most individuals of other faiths whom I have met, however, and many in some Christian denominations too, their religion is a primary identification – almost all my Hindu friends were born into Hindu families, most of my Jewish friends were born to Jewish parents. On the other hand, Bahais and Buddhists in the UK include many who – like UK Quakers - have adopted these paths. And within my friends Hindu or Jewish traditions, some have gravitated to a movement which is distinctive in character from their Hindu or Jewish upbringing. So one could say that their religious identification (and that of Quakers who have moved from another Christian denomination) is both primary and secondary.

Building interfaith understanding

Let us reflect too on the significance of understanding and building. It helps me to remember the humility of standing under, looking up from below, as well as to remember that understanding involves rapport, and that an understanding may be a negotiated settlement.

The participle, building reminds us of what the act of construction involves: intention, design, expertise, materials, labour, and ongoing need

for vigilance and repair. These reminders are basic to the reflections that follow. Importantly, building interfaith understanding means (a) building greater understanding **of** different faiths (religious ideas and communities) among Quakers and (b) building greater understanding **between** people of different faiths (whatever their religiocultural backgrounds and ideological assumptions and convictions). Building interfaith understanding means increasing understanding between people whose communities have been in conflict, between adherents to religions (such as Christianity and Islam) that include a commitment to conversion and communities (for example, Hindus) who accept that there are a variety of spiritual paths and are increasingly outraged by the conversion tactics of others. We need to take seriously the power that religions have for sparking violence and intensifying and perpetuating it. Building interfaith understanding also involves being sensitively on the lookout for the diversity and divisions **within** faith communities. Religions consist of differing groups (sects and castes, and groups that are ethnically defined). Understanding Hindus entails understanding the particular religious backgrounds and perspectives of Hindu individuals. And my lecture will conclude with (c) building interfaith understanding in the now vital sense of developing an understanding that is fitted to meeting our shared challenges as humans, an understanding that has

as its basis co-operation across faith frontiers and insights from our many heritages. In this sense of „interfaith understanding the word interfaith is the adjective that crucially defines the understanding.

In order to build interfaith understanding – in all these senses - we must understand our own conditioning and assumptions. Being reflexive means realising how others see us – as white or black, as teenagers or senior citizens, as male or female, and as individuals with a certain socioeconomic status.

Interfaith understanding also requires of us an understanding of culture. I will resist the temptation to embark on a discussion of what the word culture can mean, and instead point out that we need to discern sensitively the differences of viewpoint and experience within faith communities because of differences of generation, gender and affluence. To take „generation : this refers not only to whether one is a grandparent, parent or child but (in discussion of minority faith communities) the term is often combined with „first , „second or „third to convey whether someone moved to the UK or is the child or grandchild of a „ migrant . The high-profile issue of head covering has a generational aspect (in both senses of generation).

Whether a Sikh wears a turban and, if so, what its style is, varies from one generation to another in many Sikh families as a result of a range of pragmatic, social, devotional and political factors. In Muslim families a woman's decision not to cover her head (except for example for prayer), or to wear a *hijab*, or indeed a more substantial covering of her body including her face, similarly arises from considerations which mark out grandmothers, mothers and daughters, as they accept, interpret, downplay or assert a personal identification with Islam.

If we are to take account of the cultural features of religious communities in our concern to understand them better and to build understanding between them, it is helpful too to reflect on different prioritisations of shared values, when a choice has to be made. I am thinking of situations in which the demands of implementing values which people of different faiths affirm, such as honesty or compassion, come into conflict. One example of culturally-based difference that I have used before is the situation in which just as someone is leaving to fulfil an appointment an unexpected guest arrives. Will the demands of punctuality or of hospitality win the day? Differences of culture such as this are evident within and between faith communities.

Language is a key aspect of interfaith understanding. When conversing in English about religious matters the fact that we share a language, English, can obscure the fact that underlying a speaker's English may be concepts and practices of which a listener is unaware. To take some examples from Sikhs' usage: many refer to „baptism“ and to „priests“ when speaking respectively of *amrit sanskar*, the rite of initiation into the community of committed Sikhs (the Khalsa), and of officiants in the gurdwara. Sikhs referring to their *granthi* as priest risk inadvertently conveying to someone from another background that these functionaries are either from a certain hereditary community (as is the case with Hindu priests) or that they have a vocational training, a pastoral role and a professional standing akin to clergy of Christian and Jewish communities. Such borrowing of words, and the consequent expansion of their meaning, happens apace during a period of globalisation, the cultural context for our interfaith initiatives.

globalisation

Globalisation is a word dear to some and off-putting to others. It does, however, nicely sum up the countless and ever faster ways in which what is local penetrates what is global and what is global penetrates what is local.

Just as one can have an English breakfast, pizza and chow mein in every continent, there are Buddhist centres and mosques in European countries and Christian congregations in India and Korea. But there have been Muslims in Europe since the 8th century and there have been Christians in South India for longer than in the UK, so we can argue that in some respects globalisation is nothing new – what is new is the speed and scale and reach of the processes that are unstoppably underway. For while the movement of ideas via trade, conquest and mission is not new, the intensity and spread of interactions now is unprecedented.

change

The changes underway deserve our attention. They are interconnected and apparently contradictory. There is society's secularisation and religious apathy, plus its consumerism, as well as a shift from organised religion towards spirituality. There is society's diversity and liberalism and at the same time an increase in fundamentalism or radicalisation. We need to be on the lookout for how international events affect faith communities deeply and alter others' attitudes to them. The attack on the twin towers in New York in 2001 not only damaged the image of Muslims but also resulted in

violence, and continuing insults, towards turban-wearing Sikhs who were mistaken for supporters of Al-Qaida.

Communications media are changing. The multitude of TV channels and websites reinforce particular identities, allegiances and stereotypes and undermine older authorities and more local networks. I will risk a reference here to the contemporary UK Sikh scene and the TV channel BritAsia.

Punjabi friends tell me how its music – reworkings of Punjab's bhangra – intensifies division based on caste (hereditary group) among young Sikhs, ratcheting up the egos of young people from the dominant Jat caste and humiliating members of lower castes. Or to take another example of the impact of new media on faith communities, the internet provides discussion groups and forums and interpretation of history that may replace – or colour – their involvement with any local religious organisation. Groups that identify with a particular style of allegiance gain a sense of global legitimation. The internet erodes earlier patterns of power and authority. It may also provide us, in our own homes, with opportunities for interfaith encounter and communication. Try visiting sites that involve you in a Hindu *puja* (act of worship) or offer you advice from a rabbi or an imam.

In his book setting out permaculture (principles and practice for a sustainable future), David Holmgren identifies two responses to modernity: one is reactionary and takes the form of religious fundamentalism; the other is the radical response of aspiring to develop utopian possibilities. ³To the mainstream of our society, David Holmgren says, these two responses may well be indistinguishable. As we approach people of faith we need to be sensitive to whether a group is backward looking and we need to be alert to those who are looking forward and breaking moulds. Is the interfaith understanding to which we ourselves aspire a „utopian possibility ?

Religious educationist, John Hull has warned about the dangers of adherents allowing religious faith to give way to religionism, a tribalistic solidarity that fosters negative attitudes to other religions, rather than living in the spirit of the founder. ⁴Our understanding of religion(s) must be alert to this tendency too. Meanwhile – and in part as a reaction to religionism - many have shifted from identifying with a religion towards affirming spirituality.

A changing plurality

³Holmgren, D. (2002) *Permaculture: Principles and pathways beyond sustainability* Hepburn (Australia) : Holmgren design services, p. 200.

⁴Hull, J. (1998) *Utopian Whispers: Moral, spiritual and religious values in education* Norwich: Religious and Moral Education Press.

Let us now look more closely at the plurality or diversity of society. It is helpful to contrast „traditional plurality“ with „modern plurality.“⁵

Traditional plurality describes a society that consists of faith-related communities: Jews, Roman Catholics, Hindus and so on. Such a society resembles a jigsaw with Catholic pieces, Bahai and Zoroastrian pieces. In the UK today the pieces are the result of successive migrations. In this context building interfaith understanding is a matter of helping members of the dominant or numerically strongest community (Christians) to learn about and from members of other communities, and to mix with them, in such a way that they feel positively towards each other. There may also be planned opportunities for members of faith minorities to develop understanding of each other's faiths. Religious education, a statutory subject of the school curriculum in this country, is a significant arena for facilitating young people's understanding of different pieces of the faith jigsaw.

However, while to some extent traditional plurality is still a useful idea, any interfaith initiatives built solely on this understanding of society will be limited, and will risk not only disregarding how society increasingly is,

⁵ Skeie, G. (1995) „Plurality and Pluralism: A challenge for religious education“, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 17 (2), pp. 84-91.

but also our particular resources as Quakers. So we need to consider modern plurality .

Now an exercise for each of us: just think of yourself. Are you from a Catholic or a Jewish background? Have Buddhist or Hindu concepts or practices influenced you? Have you encountered ideas of karma or of reincarnation, or had experience of any aspect of meditation or yoga? Have you ever travelled in or lived in a country whose dominant religion differed from your own? Were you brought up by parents whose religious identity differed from yours now? Have you ever read a novel or seen a film that took you into the life world of a Muslim, a Jew, a Christian – anyone of a faith other than yours? Do you have close relatives who identify with a different faith from yours? Has this affected in any way your own attitudes, assumptions or beliefs? Have you explored any websites that showcase various religious constituencies?

You and I, like pupils in the UK s religious education classrooms, are to varying degrees part of this modern plurality , a social diversity at the individual rather than the group level. This is a society in which individuals from many back grounds have toyed with the idea of reincarnation, in which

Christians have found eastern ideas helpful in regaining equilibrium, in which more and more children have parents from different religious backgrounds. It is a society in which individuals revert to Islam, come to Christ, take on Judaism or follow a Hindu guru, but – unavoidably – take with them into the new fold themselves, the persons who developed in another setting. Increasing numbers of us move from our birthright community to a community of choice. UK society 2008 is a society of religiously plural individuals. Each one of us is a jigsaw. So, it is as intrinsically and consciously plural people that we are seeking an understanding within ourselves and among ourselves (as, for example, Quakers) as well as an understanding that is between ourselves as Quakers (or whatever) and people with other labels, allegiances and heritages.

It certainly is not straightforwardly a situation of them and us or of Quakers and other faiths. What we are seeking is an interfaith understanding that engages with how Sikhs, Muslims etc currently are, and with how Sikhs and Muslims are currently interpreting aspects of their community's heritage, rather than only with (and I say this advisedly) the representations in religious education text books or, for that matter, with the rhetoric of spokespeople and leaders, although these are part of the

contemporary scene that we need to acknowledge. Of course, at the same time faith communities – whatever these are – are undergoing change collectively as well as at this individual level.

The challenges to us in building understanding both of faiths and between faiths include: how to respond to competing truth claims such as „Islam is the one way or salvation is only through Christ, and above all the incompatibility of liberalism and absolutism. The challenges include: the pace and diversity of change; the tensions between and within communities and a widespread unpreparedness for Islam’s return to Europe.

Response of international, secular society to challenges

Perhaps more than ever before our secular society too - government for example – is itself acknowledging the challenges posed by our diverse and fast-changing society and is taking steps. Here in the UK the government is promoting social cohesion and funding relevant initiatives. Meanwhile people debate whether state-funded faith schools contribute to community cohesion or subvert it. Social cohesion is a stated goal of the statutory curriculum subjects of Religious Education and Citizenship, and an

explicitly interfaith element is beginning to find a place thanks to several religious educationists.⁶ Other countries have begun looking to the UK's non-confessional multifaith RE for tested guidelines for their own education of pupils for life in a diverse society.

A priority of the recently established Blair Foundation is to „find ways of developing and supporting education in religions and dialogue throughout the world. The Foundation intends „ to collaborate with and complement existing initiatives and a comprehensive internet portal is to be set up at the University of Cumbria. Similarly the European Union and UNESCO are supporting strategies for increasing understanding between faith communities. In 2007 the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) published *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools*, 2007, prepared by the ODIHR advisory council of experts on freedom of religion and belief.

Religious organisations, too, are engaging in interfaith initiatives.

⁶ See, for example, Ajegbo, K. (2007) *Curriculum Review: Diversity and citizenship* London: DfES. For an example of encouraging dialogue in the primary school see Ipgrave, J. (2001) *Pupil-to-Pupil Dialogue in the Classroom as a Tool for Religious Education* Coventry: Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of Warwick.

Quaker contribution – tradition and testimonies

How can we, as Quakers, complement the many initiatives that are underway? In addition to our individual mixes of experience and insight as plural people, we have historically tested moorings in a chaotic world in the shape of our Quaker tradition and our testimonies.

Let us celebrate the inclusiveness and the experimental character of the Quaker way, and its metaphors of light – inward light, light from whatever source. *Advices and Queries*⁷

reads

Are you open to new light from whatever source it may come? Do you approach new ideas with discernment?

This acceptance of light from whatever source ties in nicely with the Jain insight of the many sidedness of truth.

Quakers tradition of silence, as the medium of our Meetings for Worship, may seem off putting to many, but its centrality chimes with words spoken by gurus and seekers from other religious backgrounds. To quote a

renowned philosophical teacher from a Hindu background, Jiddu

Krishnamurti ⁷:

Silence has many qualities... There is the silence of the mind which is never touched by any noise, by any thought or by the passing wind of experience. It is this silence that is innocent and so endless. When there is this silence of the mind action springs from it, and this action does not cause confusion or misery.

Quaker tradition is rooted in both spirituality and service of others – akin to the Sikh Gurus' affirmation of *simran* (meditation) and *seva* (voluntary service) and this is borne out in our testimonies.

The testimonies are about the way Quakers try to lead their lives.

This attempt to put faith into practice, often with great difficulty, arises from an understanding of certain values and principles that are central to the Quaker faith.

These words introduce a clear statement of the testimonies of truth and integrity; peace; equality and community; simplicity; and earth and the

⁷Krishnamurti, J. (1969) *Freedom from the Known*, New York: Harper and Row

environment.⁸ The testimonies mesh with the challenges that I have mentioned as we attempt to understand faiths at depth and to deepen understanding between them, and they connect with religions both as points of overlapping values and as challenges to the practices of all our communities. The testimonies offer us guidance in our steps to interfaith understanding in all the three senses that I spelt out, and perhaps especially in building understanding between faiths.

First, the points of contact between the testimonies and the teachings of other faiths and, at least sometimes, with the practice - these are innumerable and include: Guru Nanak's much-quoted words on truth and integrity:

„Highest is Truth, but higher still is truthful living (*Adi Granth* p 62).

Affirmations of peace likewise unite our faiths: *shalom* in Jewish writings, *salaam* in Islam, and *shanti* in Indic scriptures. The Sikh Gurus' emphasis on the irrelevance of caste to spiritual liberation resonates with the testimony to equality. So too does Bahai advocacy of education for women on a par with men, illuminated by the analogy of a bird needing two wings to fly.

⁸ See <http://www.quano.org/newyork/Resources/AllQuakertestimonies.pdf> which is linked to the Jordans site www.jordans-quakers.org.uk/beliefs.html

Simplicity, meaning „standing aside from the fuelling of wants and manufacturing of new desires“ chimes with the Buddha’s identification of desire as the cause of suffering, and with the Sikh Gurus’ discernment that *lobh* (greed) and *moh* (attachment) frustrate spiritual progress. Simplicity is of a piece with the divine command not to covet (Exodus 20: 17 in the Hebrew Bible, the Christians Old Testament).

Environmental concerns typify our times, rather more than they did those of George Fox or earlier inspirational figures in our various faiths. Yet the respect for the elements and the veneration of animal and plant life that mark many indigenous ways of being, including Hindu tradition, and Zoroastrians’ centuries -old respect for the five elements, provide context and pointers for contemporary ways forward. Here I strongly commend a 2008 multifaith (including Humanist) publication on the environment, full of challenging questions and encouraging endeavour.⁹

The ways in which our Quaker testimonies challenge all our faith communities are also numerous. To take simplicity as an example first: simplicity is a challenge to materialism. It challenges those who are

⁹Brown, A., Hayward, M., Mason, M., Mercier, C., Prior, L. and Wood, A.G. (eds) *The Environment: Shap World Religions in Education* London: The Shap Working Party.

committed to smartness and display and the high levels of expenditure apparent at Christmas and weddings.

Our testimony to the environment challenges us as one apparent solution leads to another abuse – the switch to bio-fuel further swallowing up rainforest land. With regard to the testimony to equality - increasing our understanding of faith communities means increasing our awareness of prejudice and inequity **within** them. Like the teaching of the Sikh Gurus our testimony challenges the continuing practice of many families in Asia of aborting unborn daughters. It challenges too the impact of caste on the selection of marriage partners and in young people's interactions in school.

Our testimony to peace is a challenge to the conflicts that simmer and erupt, often in the name of religion.

And our peace testimony illustrates how our testimonies not only point to values that are shared across religious teachings and that challenge what happens in the associated faith communities in practice but also how the testimonies provide encouragement and guidance. The Quaker peace

testimony finds expression in countless initiatives, from the individual to the international level, which can underpin and inform our own small efforts.

Building understanding between people identifying with different faiths means being alert to history and current, unfolding international events – in Israel or North Africa - and their effect on communities and community relations in the UK. To take an example: for painful historical reasons, UK Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, Zoroastrians and Bahais, as well as Christians from, for instance, Pakistan or Cyprus have heritages of fear of Muslim dominance. Hindus and Sikhs resent the erosion of their communities by Muslim expectations that women who marry a Muslim must become Muslim. Asian gang culture in Southall and Slough has played out violently the tensions between Hindus and Sikhs on the one hand and Muslims on the other. These are UK-born young people, largely ignorant of the history and religious disciplines of their family faith, and with that human need to identify. It only takes a look, let alone a suspected relationship between a lad from one community and a girl from another for insults to turn to worse.

Hindus and Jews have historically-rooted reasons for resenting Christian efforts to win converts. Can our Quaker peace testimony, and Quakers commitment to spreading skills in conflict resolution, play a constructive role amid, for example, resentment that one faith community attracts more

media attention and funding than others. How can we equip others to ask and discuss, rather than to hide behind British reserve or to trade angry insults?

All our testimonies together uphold us as – in my third sense of „building interfaith understanding - we draw together, whatever our own allegiance, with those of all faiths in tackling issues resourcefully, hopefully and compassionately. The testimonies are a basis for living by the principles of truth and neighbourliness and for nurturing each other's spirituality and for sharing our planet's resources.

Implementing each testimony leads to putting the others into practice too. For example, Marjorie Sykes, an inspirational Friend, who spent her last years at Swarthmore Residential Home, Gerrards Cross, not far from Jordans, drew attention to a deep connection between simplicity and peace rooted in her own environmentally informed educational practice and vision.¹⁰ As principal at Sevagram, the school set up in India by Mahatma Gandhi, Marjorie declared that „To educate in simplicity is to educate in the fundamentals of personal, social and international peace.

¹⁰ Sykes, M. (1955) „Setting the Clock Back? *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 28 (5), pp.211-217.

This bears careful scrutiny – already by 1955, as she acknowledges, teaching pupils to grow cotton, harvest, spin, and weave to their own designs was regarded by smart people as „putting the clock back , but now more than ever before there is a mounting case for people of faith to develop understanding while working together on initiatives that aim for sustainability and that involve reconnecting people with their environment. More pertinent than ever is Marjorie s dictum that „True education does not consist in wandering more widely but in pondering more deeply. These words can underpin our own utopian aspirations to a better informed society in which Islamophobia and racism have dissolved into a cooperative willingness to tackle the problems that face human society and the planet.

As requested I will draw together some of the implications for both education more widely and for Quaker nurture. We need to deepen, in ourselves and others, an understanding:

1. of difference – different truth claims, different cultural norms etc
2. of culture – developing a religious literacy that acknowledges the processes at work in society and the ways in which people’s sense of identity takes shape

3. of how events outside UK impact on communities here
4. of individual freedom, recognising that we are all conditioned and yet can all be agents. (Is the young woman compelled by peer pressure to drink and date freer than the young woman who decides to wear a *hijab* and to leave introductions of potential spouses to her parents?)

We need to encourage understanding through:

1. fiction, poetry, the arts
2. opportunities for quiet, for being part of an experimenting community, for experiencing beauty etc ¹¹
3. immersing ourselves in the words of the sages, mystics and poets for whom barriers between faiths have always been a nonsense, and presenting them to our young people: the culturally Jewish Jesus who mixed happily with Samaritans and Romans, the culturally Punjabi Guru Nanak interacting with yogis and Muslims
4. the shared insights which provide a framework and a beacon amid the differences and the impermanence

¹¹ For ideas see Stone, M (1995) *Don't Just Do Something. Sit There: Developing Children's Spiritual Awareness*, Norwich: Religious and Moral Education Press.

Can we teach this vision and get beyond the building blocks of religious education which can box our neighbours by faith and founder, by belief and boundaries? Can teachers continue to:

1. point pupils to shared and overlapping values ¹²
2. invite visitors into schools – not just „leaders“ but individuals who can share their mixedness etc.
3. look for more materials on interfaith relations and initiatives
4. work at ways of challenging the structure of religious education on the basis of their being six world faiths, all too often portrayed as separate, static and homogeneous
5. try to involve pupils in community service spanning supposed boundaries.

Could this evening be an opportunity for each of us individually to work out – and possibly share in the question time - the single next step that we plan to take towards increasing our understanding of another faith or towards building interfaith understanding? This may well be a very local step, close to home. We may commit ourselves to

1. Enquire and listen: asking the taxi driver about his community, family and aspirations; letting a chat with the neighbour move on to God, death...

¹² A useful basis is The Inter Faith Network for the UK (2004) *Connect: Different faiths shared values* (London: Inter Faith Network for the UK) ISBN 1 902906 12 8.

2. Invite (a neighbour for a meal), share (a celebration, a book, a dvd), and visit (that new temple, that Somali shop, that neighbour)

Quakers may

1. invite someone to Meeting - presenting it as a resource for members of other faiths¹³

2. invite someone home for a meal and a chat – even people who have lived in the UK for many years may never have had this experience in an English home. Our own home may itself be multifaith.

3. invite different groups (e.g. small religious congregations, refugee groups) to use Meeting House.

4. invite users of the Meeting House to Quaker events

5. contribute to local interfaith and multifaith initiatives. Publications from the Inter Faith Network for the UK will put you in touch and provide helpful advice.¹⁴

6. feed their insights concerning faith communities requirements and sensitivities into policy and practice in their places of work (paid and voluntary) e.g. the Coventry Friend active among workplace chaplains and

¹³ Michael Wright wrote in the *Friend* of 8 August 2008 of the opportunities Quakers provide to people of other faith traditions to “think outside the box” and consider dual participation .

¹⁴ These very useful publications are listed at <http://www.interfaith.org.uk/publications/index.htm> and include: *Short guidelines for inter religious encounter and dialogue*, *The Local Inter Faith Guide: Faith community co-operation in action* and *Women’s Inter Faith Initiatives in the UK: A survey*

prison visitors, explaining that the time slot allowed for Muslims prayers is not constant through the year.

I will conclude with quotations:

We are called to be the salt of the earth – no expectation of the whole earth becoming salt – we can bring out the best flavour of others/other faiths.

(From Chinese Christian service, BBC Radio 4, 10 August 2008)

From Marjorie Sykes again:

The flowers of unselfish living may be found growing in other people s gardens and... rich fruits of the Spirit may be tasted from other people s trees. (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 1995: 27.1)

In 17th century north India the Sikhs tenth Guru wrote that God has n o name, dwelling place, caste, form or lineage. One near contemporary was William Penn, a 17th century Quaker, whose name lives on in the US state of Pennsylvania, and who is buried in the graveyard here at Jordans. In 1693 he wrote:

The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the divers liveries they wear here makes them strangers.

Finally, to return to my third interpretation of building interfaith understanding, what our global and local communities need is our commitment to developing together, as people of diverse faith backgrounds, a deepening understanding of the global challenges to us all. It means strengthening a multi-faith basis of shared insight, experience and co-operation, and drawing upon all the ethical and philosophical reserves we can to dissolve the hold of pride and greed and so transform life on earth. As Quakers, kept in focus by our testimonies, we can be catalysts.