

# The stranger who lives within thy gates

Public Address  
given by John Dunston  
at Ireland Yearly Meeting

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Friends, Good evening, and thank you for that warm welcome.

What a privilege it is to be here. Yet at the same time, I could have good reason to feel something of an intruder at Ireland Yearly Meeting. For it is likely that everyone here is a Quaker, or if not everyone, then almost. Yet I am not a Quaker (though I believe I count as an Attender in England). Indeed, I'm Jewish, and deeply touched to have been invited to give this Public Lecture.

Anyone not familiar with the notion of Friendship among Quakers might be forgiven for thinking that just now, I am myself the stranger within thy gates. But all my experience of living and working amongst Friends over nearly twenty years has led me to the conclusion that Quakers, rather like Jews in fact, have a particular understanding of what it means to be the stranger, the other, and that as a result, they have an instinct for overcoming "otherness". The concept of the stranger, among Quakers, becomes itself strange and almost unknown.

I want to thank especially our Friend Alan Pim, Clerk of Ireland Yearly Meeting, whom I had the great good fortune to meet in April 1990. Only one week earlier, I had started work as Head of Sibford, another of the Quaker schools in England, and it raised a few Quakerly eyebrows when within days I was off to Ireland for the biannual Conference of Heads and Deputies of Quaker Schools, held that year at Waterford. Alan and Sue very kindly put me up, the warmth and affection of their welcome immediately dispelling any anxiety I might have had, as a green, young Head, of being a stranger within their gates. I certainly never thought that one day I would be Head of Alan's alma mater (you probably know that after some years at Newtown School, he came to Leighton Park in 1954). Alan of course made a most distinguished contribution to Leighton Park through his quiet, authoritative leadership; he was also, it seems, extremely agreeable company. Some things never change.

It *is* a privilege for me to address you this evening. There was an era when real contact between Jews and Christians only arose if it was time for another pogrom as the Crusades swept through Germany on their way to the Holy Land; later in the Middle Ages, the infamous disputations on the relative merits of Judaism and Christianity were destined only ever to have one outcome; much later still, Quakers themselves were repeatedly imprisoned for their heretical interpretation of the Christian message. I could go on, but I need not. For the very act of inviting the Jewish Head of a Quaker School to address Yearly Meeting exemplifies the openness and tolerance that characterise the Society. So I thank you for the opportunity to be with you today, and to share some reflections from what you might call an outsider on the inside, reflections on what Judaism and Quakerism have to offer a world which has still not learned how to love the stranger in its midst. And towards the end, I will introduce you to Nathan.

I had the good fortune to be spending much of the spring term this year in Oxford on sabbatical. So, having only been back at school for a matter of weeks, it seems right

to begin with one brief tale out of school. Some of you will know of the Catholic boarding school which had a splendid refectory. Each day the boys would queue up for their lunch, occasionally trying to sneak an extra portion of chips or ice cream from under the nose of the caterers. One day, the large bowl of apples was adorned with a notice from one of the monks, which said simply: *One apple only per pupil. Remember – God is watching.* A little further along the counter was a huge basket of Danish pastries, into which one enterprising pupil had clearly stuck a corresponding notice: *Take as many as you want. God's watching the apples.*

That seems to me to sum up admirably the theme of Yearly Meeting this year, or at least to reflect the qualities of the quotation from Galatians on the cover of the programme: *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.* Those boys were clearly interested not only in the *fruit of the spirit*, but in more material fruit as well; they *loved* their food, took *joy* in securing extra portions of it, found *peace* in not being discovered, and gave the monks the opportunity to have their *patience* tried; their own *generosity* caused them to share extra pastries with their friends rather than leave them behind, to be perhaps thrown away; in this way, they showed both their *faithfulness* to the idea of not wasting the earth's resources, and their *self-control* in keeping a straight face until back in the dormitory. *Gentleness* was harder to reconcile, until I realised that it was followed by *and*, the two words together being clearly a coded anagram of the monks' desperate prayer to the Almighty on a Friday afternoon at the end of a tough Year 9 RE lesson: *Send ten angels.*

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That anecdote takes me quite neatly to the substance of this address. I want to reflect on what education means to me as a Jew, and how Judaism responds to the concept of the stranger in our midst, and to the education of the young (but not only of the young), which has always been a spiritual endeavour of prime importance for Jews. No matter how harsh, or how unremittingly abject, were the material circumstances in which Jews were often forced to live, it was obligatory for the community to provide a school. It is as if the very faith of the Jews has been somehow inextricably bound up with education. In the central prayer of Judaism, the Shema, Moses himself requires of the Israelites that (you)

*teach these things diligently to your children, speaking of them when you sit at home and when you walk on the road, when you lie down and when you rise up (Deuteronomy 6:7).*

Education is indeed the very basis of any free society. We should not forget that before the invention of the alphabet, knowledge – and with it, power – were closely concentrated among those at the top of the hierarchical tree. One's status and position in society were largely determined at birth. But once the alphabet had arrived, a system of using only twenty to thirty letters or characters, the concept of writing became available to all. With it came the spread of power, and dignity, and equality. It became much more credible then to claim that everyone was created in God's image. And if that really was the case, where better to develop that understanding among the young than, ultimately, in a school?

Let me share a little of my family background with you. It may help you to understand why for me the concept of the stranger in thy midst is both permanent and constantly shifting in its definition.

How prophetic is that verse from Psalm 137: *How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?* Throughout their long history, the Jews have found themselves repeatedly having to pick up the thread of their lives after expulsion from one home or another. Each time, and in every age, they have returned to this question, which has become symbolic not just of their music and worship, but indeed of their daily living and very survival.

The late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries were witness to an unprecedented increase in the number of refugees seeking to escape persecution and worse by fleeing to other parts of the world. This, in turn, created more widespread challenges among the already domiciled populations as well: the challenges of how to welcome the newcomers and then to live alongside them.

I am reminded of the story of the Viennese Jew who, in 1939, entered a travel agent's office and said, "I want to buy a steamship ticket." "Where to?" the clerk asks. "Let me look at your globe, please." The Jew starts examining the globe. Every time he suggests a country, the clerk raises an objection. "This one requires a visa..... This one isn't admitting any more Jews ..... The waiting list for that one is ten years....." Finally, the Jew looks up. "Pardon me, but do you have another globe?"

The Jewish historical experience has a real resonance for this new era in our human relationships. From it, wider lessons may be learned: about the relationship between what we commonly call church and state, and more particularly, and with special relevance for young people in schools, how that experience may be drawn upon to help generate a tolerant, constructive and mutually beneficial approach to "the other". How we deal with "the other", the stranger, is likely to be a determining factor in the very future and survival of our world.

The Jews are a people who, for thousands of years, have been seen as "the other". Yet the world continues to be shaped by their prophetic calls for human freedom, their unique mission, and their unflinching commitment to the one-ness of God and to the moral code deriving from that. The Jews have a particular responsibility, not only to survive (already one of the most baffling achievements of any people in history), but to keep alive that vision for the sake of the world. And a big part of that vision is not only the ideal of peace, but the recognition that education of the young is the prerequisite for achieving it. It is, as we know, through education that we come to understand the benefits of co-operation rather than conflict, of working together to achieve a common goal and a mutual respect. We need prophets as well as pragmatists.

You will all be familiar with that visionary passage in Isaiah: *The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.....* (Ch.11) Three points about that short quotation: one is that it's a fine ideal, inspirational and good, but it hasn't happened yet, and, given the century we have lived through, is unlikely to any time soon. (Though you probably know the story of the zoo keeper who was able, with great satisfaction, to show visitors a cage in which a lion and a lamb were living peacefully together. "How do you manage that?" the visitors regularly asked. "Easy," replied the keeper. "We just put a new lamb in every day.")

The second point is that a few verses later, Isaiah continues: *They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.* "The knowledge of the Lord" – the essential

requirement for the age of peace, and a recognition that such knowledge may take many forms, if it is to cover the earth.

And thirdly, the prophetic vision needs a practical programme of action to be realised. As I pointed out at the start, look how far we have already come, but here's a passage from the Talmud, the rabbinic commentary on the Torah, which takes forward the ideal of peace in a devastatingly simple way: *For the sake of the ways of peace, the poor of the heathens should be supported as we support the poor of Israel, the sick of the heathens should be visited as we visit the sick of Israel, and the dead of the heathens should be buried as we bury the dead of Israel.* Our responsibility is to the world.

I was born a Jew, and despite a not unusual drifting into a smug scepticism while at university, I remain a Jew. I belong to the progressive Reform tradition which began in the German-speaking lands of the eighteenth century, and represent the first generation of my family to be born in England for some time. My parents fled there from Austria as refugees (they knew better than anyone what it was to be suddenly labelled as "the other") after Hitler's *Anschluss* in 1938.

Research into the family's history has so far stretched back some nineteen generations to Rabbi Eleasar, who lived around 1450 in the German town of Neuss on the banks of the Rhine, writing poetry and lamentations on the destruction of the Temple. It is not impossible that a mere five generations before Rabbi Eleasar, his ancestors (and mine) had been among the Jewish community of England when they were all expelled by Edward I in 1290. (The Jews were not allowed back into England for just over 350 years, arriving in 1656. What a coincidence that this milestone in Anglo-Jewish history should have occurred at exactly the moment that Quakerism was emerging. In fact, it's probably not a coincidence at all, but that would be the subject of another lecture.) I take particular pleasure in knowing that Eleasar's grandson Jakob was the schoolmaster in the Jewish ghetto – the *Judengasse* – in Frankfurt early in the sixteenth century. For five and a half centuries after Jakob lived in Frankfurt, my family could have been found moving around in central Europe for reasons that are, sadly, all too familiar, settling by turns in areas we have come to know as Bohemia, Moravia, Transylvania, Romania, the Holy Roman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, and even some of the little states and principalities that, less than 140 years ago, were for the first time to become an entity known as Germany.

That catalogue of national and imperial labels is a reminder of the transience of political reality and the fragility of national identity. It also begs questions: when does the stranger in our midst stop being the stranger? How long does it take? How many other strangers have to arrive before the indigenous locals stop being regarded as strangers? How much of that perception is down to the passing of time, or to integration and assimilation, or to primitive prejudice?

I grew up in a home that felt European. I heard German spoken by my parents and by their friends. I learned directly what it meant for them all to have made their life in a new country, and how they tackled the eternal dilemma of the refugee, balancing the need to integrate and feel part of the new host community, with the desire not to lose the bearings provided by their own upbringing, values and culture. And even more acutely, what to convey to the next generation, so that it might be able to avoid the label of "stranger"?

When the Jews began to settle in Babylon after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE, they had a major decision to make. Would they establish a new home for

themselves in this new land, learn the language, and immerse themselves in its society? Or would they regard their time as a temporary sojourn, of indeterminate length, and build a fence around their lives and activities in order to retain the familiar customs and language of their homeland? Which language and culture would reflect their main identity: Chaldean, or Hebrew? In the end, of course, both options were adopted by different groups.

The dilemma, however, is instructive. It has resonance among other groups which have found themselves in a parallel predicament, and with whose diasporas we are familiar today (Chinese, Indian, and Armenian, for example). The Jewish experience is instructive on two counts in particular: the length of time during which they have repeatedly witnessed to this dilemma and had to address it – around 2,500 years – and their unique sense of mission which derives, directly, from the exhortation of Jeremiah to

*Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (29:7)*

This meant that the Jews in a strange land had a duty to live in and for that land, to serve it and to contribute to the well-being of those who had now become their neighbours. They needed, also, to have something to say and sufficient numbers through whom to say it, much as the Quakers did in Pennsylvania in more recent history.

The Jews had to cope with complete dislocation when the Temple was destroyed, but used the opportunity to create one of the greatest innovations in all religious history: the synagogue, an institution where what had previously been considered the essentials of communication with God – priests, altar, Temple hierarchy, animal sacrifice – were found to be, after all, dispensable, rooted in another era that was now gone. The very word “synagogue”, deriving from Greek, or “Beth haKneset” in Hebrew, simply means “house of assembly”, or meeting house – hardly an unfamiliar term among Quakers, and that, too, is no coincidence. They created a new way of living a Jewish life in a strange land, a way of retaining their dignity and their witness, as the land came to feel first less strange and, in time, their own. In Babylon they established a great centre of learning, whose academies and institutions were to have a profound influence on the subsequent development of Jewish thought and on its ethical contribution to the world.

In his visionary book “The Home We Build Together” (required reading, I would suggest, for all those engaged in the education of the young or in the attempt to create a more peaceful world where no-one can feel any longer a stranger in the midst of others), the Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, recounts an experiment carried out in 1954 by Muzafer Sherif, known as “The Robbers’ Cave”. It relates to two groups of boys brought to a summer camp in Oklahoma. Neither group knew the other, but spent the first week separately on team building exercises. After that, they came together through competitions, in which each team either won or lost: this generated much animosity, name-calling and the like, and the two groups even objected to having meals together. The next stage involved shared watching of films and joint social events, designed to break down the barriers: in the event, these became even more obstructive, and the aggression continued. Finally, a number of problems were put to the groups that threatened each group equally, for example a blocked water supply system, which they worked together to repair, or finding the money to hire future films once camp funds had run out. In each case, the two groups worked together, and celebrated together once they had overcome the problem together.

Of course, such outcomes have been identified in other sources and experiments too. It may not surprise a gathering like this, particularly of those engaged in the search to find the good – that of God – in everyone. But the study very honestly recognises that, although our natural inclination to reject, criticise, vilify, exclude, and eventually demonise “the other” seems to be an inescapable part of human nature, it *can* be overcome.

It can be overcome not by fine words and lofty ideals alone, though they certainly help, but by action together, by working on a common project that will be of benefit to both. In modern parlance, it’s a no-brainer, and we need to keep repeating this message which lies at the heart of all true religion and which is the outcome of all true education.

Let us think for a moment of what happened only a few months ago in London. The leaders of the G20 nations, including the most powerful men and women on the planet, were gathering at their summit for the team photograph, before spending the rest of the day saving the world for the next generation and future generations. We can only wish them success and God’s guidance in that endeavour. In schools, our lives are spent with the young, who will have to inherit the financial disaster we are already bequeathing them. As if they didn’t have enough to cope with in their childhood in various parts of the world: over a hundred million children have no schooling at all; by the middle of the next decade, universal primary education will still not be available in around a third of the countries of the world; in Somalia less than one child in five of primary age goes to school; the nine countries with the poorest record of primary schooling have less than three quarters of children attending, and they are all in Africa; fourteen of the fifteen countries with the highest rates of infant mortality (all over one hundred per thousand live births) are in Africa, and the other is Afghanistan; life expectancy is below age 50 in nineteen countries, of which eighteen are in Africa, and the other is Afghanistan. Isn’t it time we recognised even here the stranger in our midst?

Listen to the stories of Ben Okafor, a former child soldier from Nigeria, in order to begin to understand a little more about what lies in store for some children, even today. He has worked with all the Quaker schools in England, sensing the common purpose in trying to create a world in which children themselves are no longer the victims of “otherhood”.

How instantly this slur on our human race and human dignity could be alleviated by only a fraction of the millions, billions and trillions that have been instantly found by the G20 to prop up – as they had to – the world’s financial system in order to rescue its economic system. It is, just, possible that out of the current crisis may come a better understanding of our mutual interdependence, and not before time. You here, in this gathering of Quakers, in a country that has suffered from more than its fair share of “otherhood” and persecution, are the ones who, above all, can help the young to rise above their differences, and to discover the astonishing gifts that our world could offer, drawing spiritual strength even from adversity.

When my father had arrived in England as a young man, with little but the clothes he stood up in, he was interned, along with hundreds of other Jewish refugees from Austria and Germany, – as an enemy alien – on the Isle of Man. It’s hard to imagine how they must have felt. He was to lose his parents and his sister and much of his family in the camps of the Holocaust, and found himself in England, in that country of refuge, behind barbed wire himself. Some despaired. But most did not. In that camp was born the Amadeus String Quartet, and indeed a university was established by

those writers and academics, musicians and philosophers, scientists and mathematicians, who had escaped Nazi-occupied Europe. With scarcely pencil or paper between them, they ran a programme of over forty lectures a week, reflecting a real triumph of the spirit. One of these great men told a parable that shows how limited can be our understanding of what could be in store for us. It's recounted in a book by his son, Ben Zander, where we hear of four young men at the bedside of their father, who is dying. The father manages to convey to them that a vast treasure is buried out in their fields, but not exactly where, despite their pleas. Straight after his death, the sons are out, digging away deeply and energetically from one end of the estate to the other – to no avail. They find nothing. The next season, however, the farm yields the best harvest it has ever done.

Isn't it wonderful how, in the most surprising circumstances, little miracles can occur? Of course, they're not great miracles, the sort that established religions love to bandy around like credentials of spiritual respectability; they're the little miracles that the young in our schools often surprise us with. Certainly that's true within the silence and ministry of Quaker worship.

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And what do Quaker schools have to say about the stranger in our midst? Indeed, what does it mean when a school calls itself Quaker? We all know the importance of signs and symbols. Most religions have a generous helping of such things, aids to worship perhaps, or to communicating with God, or to expressing the inexpressible. That, I suppose, is already one area where Jews and Quakers would understand each other particularly well, since their places of worship – the synagogue and the meeting house – are invariably devoid of any form of representation of the divine.

You won't be surprised to learn that many people, on coming to see Leighton Park, or any of the other Quaker schools, for the first time, wonder what it's all about. They're normally familiar with the cereals which, of course, have nothing to do with Quakers, but everything to do with the fact that the Quaker "brand" was regarded as a good or unique selling point. There must be many Irish examples of this, but within England, the biscuits of Huntley and Palmer (from Leighton Park's town of Reading), the chocolate of the Cadbury's and the Fry's, the shoes of the Clark family and the mustard made by Reckitt and Colman, the table water biscuits from Carr's and the matches of Bryant and May (which until not so long ago, I believe, included the words *The Quaker Match Company* on each box) – all these represented something different from the norm. These were reliable products, not made by the exploitation of human labour and not unreasonably priced. They came from companies that treated their workers well, unusually so in the industrial climate of the nineteenth century particularly. Their economic success did not go unnoticed.

There exist many earlier examples of how Quakers, strangers living within the gates of establishment society, had been perceived, and not always positively. James Walvin, in his fascinating study of the material success and moral underpinning of Quaker businesses, quotes a late seventeenth century rival who wrote bitterly that Quakers had *Grip'd Mammon as hard as any of their Neighbours; and now call Riches a Gift and a Blessing from God*. Yet true it is that many of the values that lay at the heart of those great Quaker businesses have now been accepted as good business practice worldwide. The language used may be different, but the understanding of what is fundamentally important is not – it may be rare to find a multi-national referring to *that of God* in their workforce, but it would be no less rare

to find one that did not value its employees as its most vital resource. How gratifying to find that the practices of the strangers have now become the customs of the majority. We should all take heart from that.

Quaker schools, too, dared to go where education had not gone before. In their adventurous early approach to the curriculum, and more recently in their ability to welcome all young people as equals, whatever their background, lie two of the distinguishing features that enable the spirituality and tolerance of young people to be developed for the benefit of everyone, and for communities to be created in which there are, quite simply, no strangers. Many of those features jump out as negatives initially: aspects of educational provision or religious provision that you might readily expect to find in a school, but won't in a Quaker school, such as military training (an all-too common feature of many English public schools), a strongly hierarchical structure, a regular framework of liturgy or even a chapel or a chaplain. It would be too easy, but wrong, to equate the absence of those elements with somehow a denial of something essential for the educational or physical wellbeing of the pupils, but the evidence exists to show that it's actually the reverse. Quakers have always been very good at questioning the accepted line, the received wisdom, and at asking "Why?" or even more saliently, "Why not?", questions which have driven astonishing achievements in social reform over the years. I will refer to a third challenging question, "So what?", later on.

Let me put this into context. What on earth were Quakers up to when they began their radical re-interpretation of Christianity and the Truth it represented in the middle of the seventeenth century? Just think how far we have come, since the days of the English Revolution that gave birth to Quakerism. That was a time, if ever there was one, when dire consequences were attached to being a stranger, a member of the wrong tribe, the other, whether Royalist in the face of supporters of the Commonwealth, or vice versa, or indeed a Catholic or a Protestant in the wrong company. How brave, how far-sighted, were those groups which sprang up at the time, small, religious groups, visionary and sectarian, of whom the Quakers are the great survivors. Yet they could not reconcile what they saw as the teachings of Jesus with the contemporary practice of the established Church or indeed of any of the Church hierarchies. Professed faith and actual practice did not match. Violence and Christianity did not, to their mind, sit comfortably together. One remark of George Fox remains as apposite today as it was then. In the vernacular of the time: *Christ saith this, and the apostles say this – but what canst thou say?* It is this focus on the individual's response to God that seems almost to transcend the clay-footed development of dogmatic, institutionalised religion, but which at the same time ensured that Quakers would always be seen as outsiders. At considerable personal risk, they stood up for the truth, for a truth they perceived as submerged beneath the waves of hatred and violence that engulfed the land. And that truth has been expressed by Quakers consistently over the centuries, drawing the attention of mankind to our common heritage with a profound humility and a readiness to accept - or at least to hear openly – the views and insights of those with whom one disagrees, whether in large things or small. Duncan Wood, a pupil and teacher at Leighton Park School, expressed it well in the 1960s: *National, racial and religious differences, he wrote, have not destroyed our common humanity but they have given it different faces which may tempt us to forget that all things that really matter, life and death, birth, love, joy and sorrow, poetry and prayer, are common to us all.* In the end, there is no better starting point for the salvation and healing of the world, or "Tikkun Olam", as Jewish tradition would put it in Hebrew, and the genuine welcoming of the stranger within our gates.

Of all those groups from the time of the English Civil War, it is only really the Quakers who have survived to our day. One reason may well be the persecution which they suffered continuously. As we know, there's nothing like a bit of persecution to help a minority thrive and survive. Yet Quakers never lost their self-esteem, recognising that we need to show ourselves a degree of love, because until we can do that, what chance have we of loving our neighbour? Here again there's a point of contact with Jewish teaching, since that great commandment that we should love our neighbour as ourselves appears first in Leviticus 19:18, in scriptures with which Jesus would have been very familiar as a practising Pharisaic Jew. He would also have known the even more poignant exhortation in the Old Testament, later in the same chapter of Leviticus: *The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt* – a reminder of the epic journey from slavery to freedom that has inspired humanity for three and a half millennia.

(By the way, did you know the three reasons that prove Jesus was Jewish? Well, by the time he was thirty, he was still unmarried and living with his mother; he went into his father's business; and his mother thought he was God.)

Let me come now to the elements of Quakerism that I see as fundamental to its witness and to its vision of inclusiveness, the antidote to rejection of the stranger, and which all have a daily, almost tangible impact on the schools which espouse Quaker values: worship, non-violence and social reform.

The heart of Quakerism is of course our coming together for worship: meeting for worship is where we start, and where we stop. We start there, because we come together in silence, in the presence of God, not with a shopping list of prayers and requests for an already pretty busy deity, but with an open heart and mind, ready to listen for what God may be requiring of us. It's surprising how often ministry can trigger a whole chain of thoughts and even other ministry, from pupils of so many backgrounds. What George Gorman called *the amazing fact of Quaker worship*, becomes a reality among hundreds of young people each week, of whom only a tiny proportion might be from Quaker families.

That is the miracle. It remains for me as Head a constant challenge: how to convey the experience of four hundred young people, teenagers, from a score of nationalities and more than a handful of religions, including also a significant and healthy number of doubters and out and out atheists, all ready to contribute to the silence of the meeting by their own silence, and, perhaps even more remarkable, to listen with empathy and openness to the very personal testimony that often characterises ministry from their peers. No giggling, no shuffling and shifting, no provocative counter-ministry: just the proof of the good in young people that can be released when, for all their different religious, racial, national, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and idiosyncrasies, which in other environments might be the cause of mirth and mockery, they are simply accepted as an indispensable part of a community of equals. No strangers within our gates here: we're either all strangers, or none of us is. It redefines what a school might be. As The Good Schools Guide wrote recently of one of the Quaker schools (though it could, I think, have been written of any of them): *More schools would do well to follow (this) model.... We found it one of the most distinctive schools we'd visited and came away with a renewed sense of hope for the future.*

The Quaker imperative of responding to "that of God" in everyone creates an environment of tolerance, honesty and integrity that makes for a distinctive type of school community, one in which, from the outset, it is accepted that God may be

sought in ways other than our own, ways whose insights might even have something valuable to teach us. And the worship of God, based on silent listening and waiting, is a spiritual experience that draws together those of many different faiths, and offers a non-material place of peace and a refuge to those who deny a faith and to those who feel they cannot yet know if they have a faith or not, a not uncommon position for the young to take.

Moving now to non-violence and peace, we all know that they can be rather like motherhood and apple pie. Who would admit to being against them? It's rather like the constant drive in our schools to "raise standards". I've yet to come across a local authority or to hear from the government that they are working hard to lower standards. But for Quakers, peace is something much more fundamental than an absence of war. Far from retreating into a disingenuous utopia, they have found ways to use their energies to alleviate suffering, without taking one side and thereby rejecting the other.

Up in the hills above Belfast, directly overlooking the urban border between the Catholic and Protestant enclaves of the city, stands a little house, quite isolated, known simply as Quaker Cottage. Here, Quakers ran a crèche for mothers and toddlers from both sides of the divide, whose men folk would be spending their days or nights as paramilitaries. While the fathers did what real men do, the mothers – Catholic and Protestant – met and talked in the cottage on the hillside. And their little children played together with "the other", too. It was a small but significant gesture, a reflection of the Quaker peace testimony in action.

When I visited Quaker Cottage and saw these toddlers, I was reminded of the story of the starfish, which I'm sure you all know. Walking along the sea shore, which was covered in marooned starfish, a man came across a woman who was bending down to throw them, one by one, back into the sea. "This beach must have thousands upon thousands of starfish on it," he said to her. "What difference can it possibly make if you save that tiny number?" She smiled at him, picked up another and tossed it into the sea. "It'll make a difference to that one."

But how do we translate such high ideals into a school context? We all know how much schools generally pride themselves on their "good discipline", when what they really mean is tight control. Real discipline, for children or for adults, but best learned of course as a child, comes from within. It is only through self-discipline that true tolerance of the other can be achieved. Here is a passage by John Reader, former Head of Great Ayton School: *The Quaker emphasis in education probably lies in non-violence, in participation and in caring. Not only to run the school without violence, but to produce young people who will feel a concern to reduce the level of violence in the world. Not to impose the aims of the school on the pupils, but to lead them to their own acceptance of these aims, to a share, however, small, in its running and a pleasure in its successes, to find that of God in every pupil.*

Finding that of God in every pupil, and then, even more importantly, responding to it, is the challenge which, when met, enables a school to dispense with some of those trappings which might be thought essential to the smooth maintenance of order and discipline, replacing them with the trust which is so often denied to young people, and which enables the very concept of the stranger to disappear. If it can vanish from a school community, then there is yet hope that it can, one day, disappear from the wider world.

Now, social reform. Does anyone here know who is on the back of our current English £5 banknote? You may already know that it's Elizabeth Fry. She was a brave

woman, going into women's prisons, which were at the time unimaginably awful, to read the Bible to the women and to teach them to read for themselves. You'll see if you look closely that there is a picture of just that happening, not only to the women prisoners, but to their children as well, who, it seems, regularly had to accompany their mothers to jail if there was nowhere else for them to go. Elizabeth Fry led the cause of prison reform. Her work is not yet done, but derived directly from the Quaker testimony to equality, equality of worth of every human being before God, whatever state they were in, and however they might have lost direction in their lives. That natural humanity shines through. It's the sort of vision that young people rightly have. They want to make a difference. They have no hesitation in telling the adults what's wrong with the world they're going to inherit, and they want to do something about it. They don't see the differences between people that adults see. How much we could learn from them about welcoming the stranger.

Two years ago, we marked in England the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bill that was supposed to abolish the slave trade. It is – for obvious, establishment, reasons - little known that nine out of the twelve members of the Committee leading the movement were Quakers. We know all too well that slavery has not yet been abolished throughout the world. There is much work to be done. The recent visit of President Obama to the coastal slave stations in Ghana could yet represent a turning point in the world's understanding of our human interdependence. Not for nothing have he and his wife made it possible for their daughters to have a Quaker education.

A Quaker education: I've tried to give an indication of what it can mean and how it can help young people see the stranger not as the other but as a friend. Remember, though, that in most Quaker schools perhaps no more than 5% of pupils are in fact from Quaker backgrounds. All of us involved in Quaker education find ourselves trying to listen, to explore ways of resolving conflict peacefully, to be unremittingly hopeful in creating community in our schools and in the wider world, and in welcoming "the other".

Let me share with you, to end this part of my reflections, the insight of Caroline Graveson on what the school curriculum should include:

*I may reach God through Keats, you by Beethoven, and a third through Einstein. Should not education to the Christian mean just this – enlarging and cultivating the country of God; and the subjects on any school timetable be thought of as avenues to an increasingly fuller life in God?*

"The country of God.....An increasingly fuller life in God": Caroline Graveson sums it up admirably, for the urge to religious belief must be one of the strongest of all human urges, one that has withstood the test of the most ruthlessly atheistic of dictatorships, as well as the ferocious efforts of those who have sought, and continue to seek, to subvert the innate goodness of the deistic concept. The terrible suffering inflicted by those of one faith on those of another, and even by those of different branches of the same faith on each other, has hardly helped mankind to perceive the truth. The fuller life in God has the capacity to incorporate many interpretations, reflecting the story so well told by Gerald Priestland of the climbers on the mountain, on several faces of it, who, only when reaching the summit, discover each other at the same time as they discover that the view from the top is the same, whichever route they chose to get there. In our increasingly fractured society today, where just now Moslems, particularly, are on the receiving end of so much suspicion and hatred, and demonised even as they dwell peacefully among us, we would do well to remind ourselves of the notion of the country of God. For if God is to mean anything, we must recognise that those whom we perceive to be the stranger are also made in His

image. What human arrogance it is, to imagine that we can define the image of God. This may just be the age in which we can find the humility to challenge that centuries-old assumption.

I once had a set of prospective parents visiting the school. Towards the end of our meeting, they clearly had one unspoken question which they were diffident, even embarrassed, about asking. In the end, they did. "Look," said the mother, "It's like this. I'm Protestant....." "And I'm a Catholic," interrupted the father. "Is that going to be a problem here?" Where else should their son go, I replied, with a Protestant mother and a Catholic father, but to a Quaker school with a Jewish Headmaster?

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Now, earlier this year, I found something in the press which seemed to have a certain resonance for this particular gathering. It was the haunting advert for one of the world's great wristwatches, which claims that *you never actually own* [this particular watch], *you merely take care of it for the next generation*. And that's surely it. This is what it's all about. What we're all engaged in is not just preserving lifeless technology, but handing on to the next generation our spiritual understanding of the world and its people in good health, having perhaps contributed a little to its earthly development. When I asked the question "So what?" earlier on, this is what I am referring to. What difference does it all make, in the end?

One answer was provided for me just a few weeks ago by one of our parents, a Ugandan mother working at the United Nations in Vienna, married to an Austrian. On a recent visit to the UK, she was subjected to the sort of lengthy and searching questions at passport control to which she has had to become accustomed. As it went on, she found herself telling the customs officer all about the Quaker education her son was receiving, and about the unexpectedly natural affection and respect with which he was treated by everyone. The man behind the desk had vaguely heard of Quakers and had thought that they were generally good people. The interview may not have been shortened as a result of the conversation, but he certainly learned far more than he had expected when he saw just another African face in the queue. So what? *That's* what. It was a genuine starfish moment.

Let me come now to Nathan, who answers the question perfectly. This is not the Nathan made famous in the anthem by Handel, where the prophet plays second fiddle to Zadok the Priest; but another Nathan, who became quite well-known during the Enlightenment in Germany, but whose time is, I think, yet to come.

Nathan? Or, as he is better known, Nathan the Wise. Nathan der Weise. He is the eponymous character in the eighteenth century play by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

Lessing was born in 1729, and was already a well-known critic and dramatist when he met and became a close friend of the great Jewish philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, grandfather of the composer Felix, whose bicentenary we celebrate this year. Lessing is one of the best-known representatives of the Enlightenment. He was a brilliant scholar, a formidable debater, and a tireless campaigner against prejudice. He had written his play, *The Jews*, in 1749, before he met Mendelssohn, describing it as the *outcome of serious reflection on the shameful oppression endured by a nation which, I should have thought, a Christian cannot contemplate without a kind of reverence*. It had been written in the ambivalent climate of Frederick the Great's "Charter Decreed for the Jews of Prussia" of 1750, which promised the Jews closer cultural, economic and political ties with the state and, for the first time, the status of actual subjects, but at the same time revealed considerable contempt

and distaste for them, as well as a desire to limit the competition they might afford to the Prussian Christian business community.

What was startling and original about Lessing's *The Jews* was the sympathetic portrayal of the Jewish main character, known as the Traveller (whose Jewish identity is, however, not known for most of the play). He rescues the Baron from highway robbers who are initially assumed to be *damned Jews* but who turn out to be employees of the Baron himself. The Baron offers the Traveller his daughter's hand in marriage, but the Traveller has to refuse, explaining *I am a Jew*. He also turns down an alternative financial reward offered. By the end, the Baron is embarrassed by his earlier slights against Jews in general: *Oh, how commendable the Jews would be*, he exclaims with inadvertent irony, *if they were all like you!* to which the Traveller gently replies: *And how worthy of love the Christians, if they all possessed your qualities*. The Traveller also states that he asks nothing more than that in future the Baron should reach less harsh and generalising judgements about his people (and by extension, to our modern sensibilities, about anyone regarded as "the other", the stranger in their midst).

Thirty years later, another play by Lessing became known as a parable of tolerance and reason in the search for religious truth. *Nathan der Weise*, first published in 1779, brings together a Jew, a Christian and a Moslem whom we see clearly as representatives of their religions. The centre point of the plot is the story, told by the Jew Nathan to the Moslem Saladin, of the opal ring which had the power

*To make the owner loved of God and man  
If he but wore it in this faith and confidence.*

The ring, also conferring leadership of the house and the family, was passed down from generation to generation, until it reached eventually a father who loved all his three sons equally and could not decide which one should inherit the ring. Secretly he has two exact replicas made. Each son receives one ring with his father's blessing. After the father's death, of course, each claims to have the true ring and to have inherited the father's mantle.

*But all in vain*, explains Nathan, *the veritable ring  
Was not distinguishable –  
Almost as indistinguishable as, to us,  
Is now – the true religion.*

Nathan goes on to explain to Saladin that unless each of the three brothers, by his love for the others and by his behaviour, could make himself indeed *loved of God and man*, then it was entirely possible that the original ring had in fact been lost, and that the father had had three replicas made. *Splendid!* cries Saladin. And we then hear Nathan's final explanation: each son was to believe he had inherited the true ring, and should therefore treat the others with affection rather than prejudice:

*Let each one strive  
To gain the prize of proving by results  
The virtue of his ring, and aid its powers  
With gentleness and heartiest friendliness,  
With benevolence and true devotedness to God.*

Nathan becomes the spokesman for the true ideals for the Enlightenment (surely even more relevant today): tolerance, brotherhood, love of humanity, and, in religious terms, the understanding that all faiths come ultimately from one God. This, at a

stroke, undermined the concept of the superiority of one religion over another, and with it any notion that any religion had the right to force itself on the adherents of another.

So I like to feel that we all here are walking in Nathan's footsteps. Both Nathan and Saladin were outsiders, strangers, in the midst of the Christians, yet they were the first to perceive what Quakers take for granted. We all find ourselves in the position where we can re-interpret the Truth as we learn more about it. We should perhaps always keep in mind the words engraved in 1891 above the main gate to Harris Manchester College, Oxford, where last term I spent my sabbatical: *To Truth, To Liberty, To Religion*, three concepts that are the cornerstone of our humanity, and, if we choose to acknowledge it, the underlying basis for the acceptance of each other.

The title for this lecture is drawn from the Book of Deuteronomy, chapter 16, at a point in the narrative where the Israelites are enjoined by God to keep the feast of tabernacles for seven days during their wandering in the desert on the way from slavery in Egypt, a journey which culminated in the giving of the Torah. *Rejoice in your feast, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your servants, and the Levite, and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are within your gates.* The huts in which they slept were temporary and fragile constructions, reflecting the very precariousness of their existence. Yet even here, they are commanded to look after the vulnerable in society, which is at the heart of Judaism, and indeed of Quakerism too. As Konrad Braun wrote: *Enormous is the amount of wrong in the world...Love, mercy and pity command us to do our best to right these wrongs, to oppose iniquity and to see more justice done to those who suffer from injustice.*

Nathan would, I am sure, have felt in sympathy with this, and with St Benedict who stated, in his Little Rule for Beginners, that he wanted to *establish a school for the Lord's service*. That, put so simply, is the way to nurture the spirituality of youth, to foster the idealism of the next generation, to care for the stranger within our gates, and, in the words of Moses Mendelssohn himself, *to leave the world a little better for our sojourn in it.*

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