

What can't Friends say in Ireland in the twenty-first century?

[Some observations of a convinced Cork Friend 1984 -2018.]

Advices and Queries.

Number 34. *"Remember your responsibilities as citizen or the conduct of local, national and international affairs. Do you shrink from the time and effort your involvement may demand?"*

Number 38 *"If pressure is brought upon you to lower your standard of integrity, are you prepared to resist it? Our responsibility to God and our neighbour may involve us in taking unpopular stands. Do not let the desire to be sociable, or the fear of seeming peculiar, determine your decisions."*

"Two men went up to the temple to pray; one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself. 'God I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all I possess.' And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner" Luke Chp 18, verses 10-13

I have always had a dilemma with this parable. Though my social and moral instincts would associate me with the publican, from early childhood however I have suspected that perhaps I am a Pharisee at heart.

In primary school when the teacher read out the school rules I assumed that she was addressing the 'bold boys' in my class. I was a good boy so her reprimands didn't apply to me. I was a respectable middle-class boy

in a school of scruffy unwashed miscreants from the local council estate. Even as a very young child I felt that I was different from my classmates. My father had a permanent job. He didn't smoke or drink. There were only two children in my family. Consequently we were well off compared to my peers.

I sometimes wonder does the experience of The Society of Friends mirror my sense of marginalisation within Irish society? Could this explain their reluctance to comment publicly on the exigencies that face society in Ireland in 2018? Could this sense of being a small, marginalised minority account for my perception that the voice of Friends in Ireland is muted, to the point of being silent?

There are, I suggest, three reasons to account for this reticence. The historical context of Quakers in Ireland, the hopelessness of the circumstances of the times we live in and some of our practices that stifle initiative.

Harry's perception of Quakers.

1. The past is a foreign country.

Since their establishment in the seventeenth century Friends have always been a marginalised, fringe religious minority. Not being of the Established Church in Ireland, Friends suffered the same persecution under the Penal Laws 1650 to 1829 as the majority Catholic population. Friends were forced to pay 'tithes' to the state for the upkeep of the Church of Ireland. Friends were debarred from entering the professions or from having any agency in the public arena of Irish life.

As a consequence of this repression, Friends (as a group), withdrew in on themselves. They relied on one another for mutual support, and generally reduced their involvement with the wider society. They got on with their own business, kept their heads down and their mouths firmly shut. As a consequence of this marginalisation within Irish society, Friends became resolute, reticent, sober and cautious. They did not fit into the normative social and political categories and hierarchies of Irish society. Quakers had always been regarded as a 'peculiar people'. They were perceived as non-conformist Protestants. They were highly regarded for their industry, commercial acumen, a reputation for honesty in their business dealings,

for their work in providing famine relief, and the provision of livelihoods for the destitute population amongst whom they lived.

When the Irish Free State was established in Ireland in 1921, Friends were a minority within a Protestant minority. Quakers became even more isolated in the emergent Free State in which the Roman Catholic Church permeated all aspects of civic, administrative and social life.

The educational sociologist Paulo Freire, in his book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' (1963) wrote that

"during the initial stage of a struggle (for independence), the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors. The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be (free) men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity."

Current examples might include Nicaragua, Israel, Zimbabwe, and some of the Balkan states.

It is what happened in Ireland during the decades that followed independence. The dominant republican Catholic establishment having 'thrown off the yoke of English rule' became the new oppressors in the fledgling independent state. The orthodoxy was complete. A 'doxa' so pervasive that no alternative could be conceived of. Catholic thinking suffused all human interaction. In health, education, professional training, civil service 'holy, poor, catholic, rural, white Ireland was pure, pastoral, and ignorant. Friends did the best they could and got on with life.

Quakers in Ireland had always been seen as 'west Brit'. This added to their sense of being 'other'. Relationships within 'these islands' are fluid, ambiguous and complex. They form a matrix that is always shifting and never stable. The outbreak of 'the troubles' in 1969 and the fractured nature of society in Northern Ireland made relations with those of a different religious persuasion delicate. What Heaney called the:

Northern reticence, the tight gag of place and times. Where to be saved you only must save face. And.... whatever you say, say nothing.

Friends in Ireland today are regarded as thoughtful, diligent, conscientious folk, who exercise, with a touch of gentility, a disciplined code in their lives. They are known for their work in securing the

abolition of slavery, their opposition to the Arms industry, their Peace testimony, their work on prison reform, and Friends are perceived as benign do-gooders, well regarded in Irish society, even if a tad innocent and naive.

The qualities one might associate with Friends might include; forbearance, frugality, modesty, simplicity, sustainability (recently), thoughtfulness, respect for others and the environment, responsibility, sobriety, equality. We lack dogma; we have no hierarchy, restriction on office holders, collectivisation in decision-making.

2. The 'interesting times' we live in:

The second factor that limits Friends' ability for outreach is the utter confusion that permeates much of modern life. For the last 300 years in Western Europe a culture has developed that has pushed God out of one area of life after another. This process was a liberation of reason, science and individual creativity from the shackles of superstition and absolutism. But it also led to a cultural climate in which truth has been shattered into relative fragments; in which no expression of ultimate purpose has proved resistant to the corrosive force of nihilism. Once the world in which larger virtues held sway was dismantled, what is left is success and self-expression, the key values of an individualistic culture.

This moral relativism is the counterpart intellectually to the material effects of international capitalism. Just as the whole world has become our supermarket for material goods, so there is a market of ideas from which we can pick and choose: philosophies, religions, and ethical theories are there along with cars, electronic goods and holidays, to be chosen from and consumed at will, a smorgasbord in which there are no absolute preferences. Without a transcendent dimension, relativism spreads everywhere; it is a quagmire within which we are sucked into the anti-spiritual terrain of the absurd.

Our society is becoming more unequal; consumerism has developed far beyond the meeting of basic needs; the worship of money has become more unbridled; the self-centred individual had become a role model; the times have changed and few of us see social and political change as working towards the Kingdom. The values of world and spirit have moved apart.

We now live in a world of super propaganda, corporate money, political rhetoric, economic mystification, universal jargon, universal publicity

and international communicatorise. The world has become so voluble and fast-talking that language itself is suspect. We are subjected daily to duplicitous communicae and reports from agencies that deal in appeasing half truths, fake news, hysterical superlatives, glossy half lives, images stolen or altered, products and people promoted, and lives taken or broken in the cause of implacable slogans. Intellectual rigour and expertise have been debased in our modern society.

In this dispensation Friends, with their conscious and scrupulous intelligence, can only regard the world as a jabbering marketplace dealing in fake currency and engaged in a monstrous welter of self-interest and exploitation. One could easily fall into despair.

Second Coming by WB Yeats.

"Turning and turning in the

Widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the

falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre

cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon

the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is

loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is

drowned;

The best lack all conviction,

while the worst

Are full of passionate

intensity."

How do Friends, repining for a deeply coherent, deeply possessed personal religion mirroring a spiritually-grounded authentically experienced world, react to this barrage of propaganda and mischievous false information? There is a danger that Friends may accede to the vapid verbal universe we are doomed to inhabit and sink into our own personal limbo-land with all our old responsible language, hermitically sealed off from the world. A withdrawal from mainstream society (which has been the Quaker default position) could lead to Friends becoming, as Eliot's Hollow Man:

*Our dried voices, when we whisper together
are quiet and meaningless.
As the wind in dry grass, or rats' feet over broken glass in
our dry cellar.*

Friends in Ireland are aware of the portents of our time. They can see that history is repeating itself. Marian Ryan (198?) in her account of the decline and fall of the Roman empire, lists five characteristics of the time which she feels contributed to the demise of Roman society:

- *The undermining of the sanctity and dignity of the home.*
- *Higher taxes and the spending of public monies on free bread and circuses for the populace.*
- *The craze for pleasure; sports becoming every year more exciting and more brutal.*
- *The building of gigantic armaments and defenses while the real enemy lay within the decadence of the people.*
- *The decay of religion - faith fading into mere form, losing touch with life and becoming impotent to warn and guide the people.*

Friends of course recognise these signs in modern society but are silent.

3. Some things we might consider for the future.

Conduct of Business meetings: Our business method is good. It has been tried, tested and refined over the generations and has been found to be our best procedure for discerning the will of God in the meeting, and arriving at good solutions to the issues that come before us.

However some Friends either do not understand how our method works or choose to ignore it. I found this to be particularly true at Newtown School Committee (though not the Patron body).

Our practices have not adapted to the realities of members' lives in the modern world. For example, for 37 years I worked full-time five days a week. Saturday was devoted to housekeeping, grocery shopping and cleaning. The only free day was Sunday. Following Meeting for Worship our Monthly Meeting begins at 12:30pm. I often had the experience of looking out the window around 3:00pm wondering when will this tedious meeting would come to an end and I could get out and go home.

Some Friends are indulged by the culture of the Society to speak interminably and repeatedly, abusing the meeting by persisting with arguments that have often little to do with the topic under consideration. For example, here is how you can hold up a meeting from forming a minute. Raise fear among the members by referring to Health and Safety, Regulations and, best of all, Insurance! E.g. Solitary bee boxes in the graveyard. The difficulty in dealing with such Members is that there is no end to it. You can't argue with them, they are right and you are bold.

Oh, I hear you say we are trying to discern the sense of the meeting, to be aware of the presence of God in our meeting. But God doesn't necessarily move in slow motion. Many Friends are not active in the Society because of the tedious nature of our business meetings. We need to improve our clerking and the discipline of the conduct of meetings if we are to retain the active involvement of all Friends not just the dedicated few.

Scruples Old Catholic condition: "*An unfounded apprehension and consequently unwarranted fear that something is a sin.*" The Quaker version, might be "an unfounded apprehension and consequently unwarranted fear that something is not perfect or that we are letting the Monthly Meeting down or that we are not as good Quakers as the crowd in Waterford or fear of embarrassing ourselves in front of Quarterly Meeting. This is manifest in anxiety that the preparation is not adequate, that we have forgotten something (when we haven't). We don't let go and let God. Sometime we might consider a seminar on 'The good enough Quaker'.

Image I don't like attending Yearly Meeting. The themes are worthy but remote from my life experience. I find the atmosphere intimidating. It evokes within me childhood feelings of feminine control by mother, matron, Theresa May. My abiding impression on entering the hall is that

these are good, honest, hard-working, dedicated folk who do everything proper. By contrast, I am a sinner and have no business being here.

Rigidity: To me there are similarities between Friends and the revival of the Irish language. I am a native Irish speaker. I learned to speak English in school. Yet I avoid any association with Gaelgari because they are suffused in a cultural norm to which I do not subscribe. Consider the following parallels between Gaelgari and Quakers:

- Certainty as to the righteousness of their beliefs.
- Rigidity in their thinking. Harking back to the past.
- Sticklers for detail. Nil tu a ra i gceart e. Nil aon saoi mu tar eis an teiseal ginideach.
- Predominately (though not exclusively) older folk. Not attractive to younger people.
- Small group in a bubble who reinforce one another's beliefs.
- Disapproval of anything outside accepted parameters of the group.
Ni thuigim Bearla
- Assumption that you buy into all the cultural norms of the group.

Over-rigidity can lead to extinction. The old members die off and are not replaced by young adherents. Jews in Cork. Synagogue, Jew town, Lord Mayor Gerard Goldberg. Now no more.

Gender. *"What"* Chaucer asks in the Canterbury Tales *"do women want?"* According to the Wife of Bath *"Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee"* (control). One of the enlightened aspects of Quakers is that from the beginning women played a full and active role in the life of the Society. Friends were literally hundreds of years ahead of society in the empowerment of women. The feminine attributes of caring, nurturing, connectedness, are important hallmarks of the Society. Women want to do things correctly, follow the guidelines or procedure. They are sensitive to the feelings of members present and interactions within the Meeting. However, in their anxiousness not to hurt anyone's feelings, not to offend anybody, the meetings can descend into tedious wordiness and indecision. We lack decisiveness.

Behind the curve. Friends are excellent at reaching decisions 'post hoc'. As an example, take the recent Special IYM on same sex marriage. This was an example of Friends at their best. I had never been to Stocking Lane before. I was really impressed with the facilities, the high degree of organisation, excellent clerking and the way a large group of Friends of

very diverse opinions could agree a minute without rancour or recrimination. However, it had the air of bolting the door when the horse was gone. We were discussing an issue when the national debate was over and should by then have been considering the Repeal of the Eighth amendment to the constitution, which was imminent at the time. Friends tend to adapt to society instead of helping to mould it.

Initiators, Effectors, and Doers.

Quakers are good at initiating ideas. We are excellent at holding meetings where we comprehensively discuss an issue and arriving at a minute. We are also good at doing things. Particularly as individuals. Where we are weakest is in effecting our minute. Requires outreach and interaction with native Irish population.

For example in 2006 Richard S Harrison and Patricia Mohally of Cork Meeting produced an excellent report on the topic of alcohol abuse in Ireland. Here is an extract from that report.

"€6.6 billion is the annual value of the drinks industry to the Irish economy. €3 billion is the annual estimated cost of drink-related health and other problems to Irish society. One in five adults have an alcohol problem according to a GP survey. 40% of all criminal offences are drink-related. 33% of drivers and 77% of all passengers who die in road crashes had been drinking. [Irish Times, 29 April 2006]. The report goes on to say that "The social acceptance of alcoholic drink does not diminish the dangers inherent in its consumption. It is often addictive, and in the view of the misuse of income and possible breakdown of health and family life it should be avoided..... The report concludes with a quotation from General Christian Counsel of Ireland Yearly Meeting 1981: "The abundant life does not come from artificial stimulation but from personal growth in physical, mental and spiritual awareness."

What happened to this excellent piece of work? Nothing.

The Society of Friends in Ireland as a corporate body is reluctant to engage in outreach in the public domain. In Cork we are fortunate that we have some Friends who over the last 10 years have actively engaged with the citizens of the city. As a result of their efforts we now open our doors to the public on a number of occasions in the year. They have organised exhibitions and public lectures on the history of Cork Quakers. As a result of their efforts, our presence in the city is enhanced and we are

beginning to attract new interest and attenders. Hopefully this will develop into new members.

The 'Latent' Society of Friends in Ireland.

What do you associate with these names? Peter McVerry, Dr John Crown, Sister Stanislaus Kennedy, Conor Falknin, Dr. Chris Luke, Orla Tinsley, Christina Nobel,

To misquote Henry Kissinger "Who do I ask for when I call the Quakers?" There is no-one that the public can associate with the Society. We might consider appointing a small Yearly Meeting Communications Committee to respond to public concerns, to formulate public statements and apply the philosophy of Friends to current events. Perhaps an annual IYM testimony on the 'state of the nation' as we see it. To borrow a term from the gay community it is time for Friends to 'come out'. Friends can bring a unique contribution to Irish society particularly in this time of flux. I would claim that Quakers have a duty to promote their well-developed code of living that could provide much-needed guidance, structure and discipline to the people living in this country.

Despite the fact that we as individuals have a view on, and often actively volunteer to help with, many of the problems that confront peoples' lives, the Society as a corporate body has made no comment on the issues that engage our fellow citizens. Friends value silence but must we be silent on everything? Consider any of the following:

- Housing, the rent situation,
- Zero hours contracts,
- Suicide, alcohol, gambling, teenage anxiety, abortion, immigration,
- Citizens' dividend/basic income, taxation, Ireland as a tax haven,
- Treatment by younger generation of the elderly [no respect for the wisdom and experience of older folk who are and are perceived as weaker, elder abuse, care of the elderly (medically prolonging life beyond its natural span),
- Ethical issues that arise as a result of new technology; Euthanasia, Nuffield College Genome Editing, the practice of keeping premature babies kept artificially alive, despite medical advice to the contrary, to live a life of constant suffering, the way Down's Syndrome people are treated.
- The tacit acceptance of violence within certain sections of society (GAA, horse racing),

- Anti-social behaviour, Travellers, (Flynn's law), Sugar,
- Meat (energy, health, treatment of chickens, pigs, salmon, dairy cows (swollen udders scraping off the ground), sheep (burning the mountain, singed hares), enclosed dry stock in feed lots, live animal transport) chickens, pig rearing, male calves,) the wanton destruction caused by the marine industry, the rearing of salmon and wild animals in cages,
- Eco-Congregation, the planetary destruction caused by the demands of constant economic growth, see Minister for Finance Mr. Paschal Donohue TD book review.
- Personal energy footprint, profligate waste of everything (energy, soil, marine life, oil, water), use of oil (precious, finite resource, Sheik ui Mahony, mid-1970s), Club of Rome report. These are just a few areas that occur to me. Friends will have their own list of concerns that the Society as a corporate body might be actively involved in, but isn't.

There will be Friends who will point out that the Society is not a political party. Politics, I would point out, is (short-term, involves immediate gain, usually populist implementation of decisions already taken by the public). Religion is (long term, common good, often unpopular, tries to lead public opinion often in hostile conditions, the voice crying in the wilderness). Besides, we have a long history of operating in the liminal space between belief and action. Consider role of Friends in the abolition of slavery, the campaign for prison reform, peace campaigning, protesting at arms shows, etc. etc.

"Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works,"

Matthew: Chapter 15, Verse 16.

I will finish with a piece of graffiti I saw recently in a café in the Cotswold's': *"In life, sometimes it is important to know when to stop arguing with people and, simply to let them be wrong."*

Collision Culture. Kieran Keohane [UCC] and Carmen Kuhling [UL]

Jonathan Dale, *Swarthmore Lecture 1996.*

Jonathan Dale '*Living What We Believe*'.

Testimonies Comm of Quaker Peace and Social Witness, 2005