THE MEANING OF MEMBERSHIP IN THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

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Quaker Publications
Box 726
Kennett Square, PA 19348

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1. Introduction

The search for the meaning of membership in the Religious Society of Friends has been a recurring theme over many years of Quaker history, and remains so today. Such a quest is a natural outgrowth of Friends' belief in continuing revelation.

Over the centuries there has been considerable writing on this topic in a broad context — from William Penn's comments on A Description of a True Quaker to Henry J. Cadbury's Pendle Hill pamphlet on The Character of a Quaker, and Edmund Hillpern's leaflet on The Minimum Quaker.

In this brief booklet the writer has brought together the thoughts of several Quakers and Quaker groups, adding some thoughts of his own, based on a wide acquaintance with different groups of Friends.

It is hoped that this short account will stimulate many individuals and Meetings to consider again the meaning of membership in the Religious Society of Friends — an elusive and baffling, yet important topic.

2. Membership in the Formative Years of Quakerism

In the early days of the Quaker movement in 17th century England, there was no formal membership. The Religious Society of Friends, as it came to be known, was an open fellowship of individuals and families who were trying to recapture the authenticity and vitality of the first-century followers of Jesus and to reinterpret His powerful message for their time. It was a society of Seekers and Finders.

The tenets of their faith were not formalized, although there was general

agreement on them — such as the immediacy of God and His availability to everyone without intermediaries, a devotion to the Historic Christ and the Ever-Present Christ, and a desire for helping to create the kingdom of God on earth.

Those small groups had their problems; they were not "colonies of Heaven." Nevertheless, they were banded together by their common beliefs and way of life and strengthened often by the suffering they endured for their faith. They were religious fellowships, caring communities, Christian cells, societies of friends.

And what a diverse group they were! They came from widely differing backgrounds rather than the predominately middle-class, educated group Friends tend to be today. There were men, women, and children. There were a few well-to-do Quakers — such as Elizabeth Hooton and Margaret Fell Fox, and many farmers and poor, working-class

people — such as Mary Fisher the serving maid. A few were old, but most of them were young; George Fox began his ministry at the age of 23. A few were highly educated — such as Robert Barclay, Isaac Penington, and William Penn, but most were uneducated.

For several decades there seemed to be no reason for formal membership; Friends were easily identified. They attended Meetings for Worship and Meetings for Business. They aided their associates who were imprisoned or persecuted in other ways. They observed the testimonies on the use of the plain language, the hat testimony, and the accepted clothing of that group. And they lived in the spirit of their Master — in simplicity, sincerity, and honesty.

But there were soon lists which approximated membership rolls. Records were kept of attenders at business meetings, of those persecuted, and of persons married "under the care of the Meeting." Such records were really an informal list of members of the Religious Society of Friends.

The excesses of some individuals in that early movement, culminating in the famous James Nayler incident, threatened its existence and led to the development by George Fox and others of a unique and remarkable organizational structure, highly democratic in nature, including monthly meetings, quarterly meetings, and a yearly meeting. By the early part of the 18th century membership was added.

How curious it is, however, to realize that Fox, Penn, Penington, Barclay and other luminaries of our group were never members of the Religious Society of Friends.

3. Stringent Standards for Membership Develop

Eventually the dedicated, able, and often fervent leaders of the early Quaker movement died, and in many places Meetings became moribund. In a

sincere, but probably misguided, attempt to retain or regain the momentum of those early years, elders and overseers tried to use membership as a means of recapturing the vitality of first-century Christianity and first-century Quakerism.

The stringent standards for membership that were imposed ruled out drunkenness, moral offenses, belief in witchcraft, — and later the owning of slaves. But those people may have been the ones who most needed the loving concern of the Meeting fellowship.

The doctrinal views of those who were recorded as ministers, and likewise of members, were closely scrutinized and the personal conduct of Friends narrowly interpreted and stringently upheld.

As a consequence, thousands of persons in England and in the American colonies were disowned for a variety of reasons. Among them were "marrying out of Meeting" (which meant marrying a non-Friend), bringing musical instru-

ments into their homes, wearing the "wrong clothes, and betting).

The result was far from what was intended. Rigidity, hardening of the spiritual arteries, and resistance to change brought further decline rather than growth.

Perhaps you — or someone you know — is a descendant of a Friend who was disowned; it seems as if nearly everyone in the United States today had an ancestor who was once a Quaker.

4. Some Effects of the Disownment Legacy on Considerations About Membership Today.

Some of the effects of that period of disownment linger with us.

Friends frequently recall that history when considering the meaning of membership today, pleading for a broad interpretation of membership, pointing out that there are many paths to God, that individual insights and needs differ, and that the Light shines as through a Giant Prism, forming many shades or beliefs. Such Friends cherish the enrichment of a Meeting which comes from persons of varied backgrounds, beliefs, and life-styles. Hence they call not just for the toleration of differences but for the welcoming of differences.

Others maintain that we welcome almost everyone today as a member of the Religious Society of Friends. Consequently there are no corporate beliefs which bind us together.

5. Meeting "Attenders"

In many Meetings today in the United States there are frequently more attenders than members. This is especially true in the new Meetings, largely in cities, and often near colleges or universities.

The status of such attenders is sometimes blurred. They are welcome at Meetings for Worship and usually at Meetings for Business. They may serve on committees of the Meeting, although they are seldom appointed to the Committee on Ministry and Oversight, or as clerks.

In almost every way, however, they are full-fledged participants in the life of the local group.

A few attenders do not join Friends because they want to retain some ties with the religious group with which they have been associated. Certainly they should be told about the Wider Quaker Fellowship (with headquarters at 1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102) which provides for people like them.

Other attenders do not see the value of membership in groups of any kind. Still others are not sure how long they will remain in a given locality and so delay applying. Then there are those who are not clear as to the meaning and merits of membership in the Religious Society of Friends.

And there are always those who have

an idealistic opinion of Friends and do not feel that they are "good enough" to join. All they have to do is look around them to realize that our Society is not one of saints but of seekers (and even sinners), yearning for Divine Guidance in their lives and in the world around us. Membership in the Religious Society of Friends brings no halos, no placques for perfection, no passports to heaven. Perhaps membership comes closer to being a learner's permit for the life-long journey towards truth and fulfillment.

Occasionally attenders prefer to be left alone on the question of membership. Sometimes they need the suggestion that they consider membership and the assurance that someone (usually a member of the Committee on Ministry and Oversight) would be glad to discuss this with them if they desired to do so.

6. Why Become a Member of the Religious Society of Friends?

Obviously one can lead a good life

without being a member of any religious group. But for many of us it is easier to lead a fulfilled life if we are strengthened by the support of fellow-seekers. It's a hazardous journey, in places, and at times, and everyone needs encouragement and assistance. As members of the Society of Friends we are more likely to feel comfortable about calling for help and more certain that we will receive it.

Also, the personal search which we make when considering membership is likely to be helpful to us. It is like taking a spiritual inventory of our lives. We can do this without applying for membership, but it is likely to be a more rigorous one if we apply. Membership then becomes a public affirmation of a private convincement; the outward sign of an inward commitment.

Furthermore, our membership can be meaningful to others. It can indicate to our children the value we place on our association with Friends. It can say the same thing to other relatives, neighbors, friends, and co-workers. We are not staying home on election day; we are casting our ballots. In an era which emphasizes secularism and indifference to transcendent values, we are opting for a spiritual emphasis on life — and saying so publicly.

An application can also help the local Quaker group. It says that we are now ready to join them in their journey, carrying our share of the responsibilities and not just walking empty-handed with them. That can give members added strength and pleasure, knowing that the newcomers also care deeply.

Elizabeth Fry, the great English prison reformer, wrote in her diary when she made her personal commitment to Quakerism, "I know now what the mountain is I have to climb. I am to be a Quaker . . . a light to the blind, speech to the dumb, and feet to the lame."

That is what she said. What sayest thou?

6. Why People Join the Religious Society of Friends These Days.

In the last 25 years there has been a noticeable growth in membership in three divergent groups of Quakers in the United States — among the yearly meetings in the Evangelical Friends International, the yearly meetings of the Friends General Conference, and in independent yearly meetings.

The gain in the Friends General Conference has been particularly strong in what is sometimes referred to as "the outer ring" of yearly meetings, meaning those outside the older groups of New England, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. As a result, the total membership in the outer ring grew from 3200 in 1960 to 5300 in 1975.

And between 1960 and 1983 seven new yearly meetings and two conferences were formed — Intermountain, Lake Erie, Northern, North Pacific, South Central, Southeastern, and Southern Appalachian Yearly Meetings and the Missouri Valley and Central

Alaska Friends Conferences. Although the Intermountain and North Pacific Yearly Meetings do not belong to the Friends General Conference, they are very similar to its member yearly meetings, especially in their adherence to the unprogrammed meeting tradition of Friends.

The gains in the period from 1960 to 1975 seemed so significant to the Advancement Committee of the Friends General Conference that they sent questionnaires to many new members to determine why they joined; 288 persons from 82 Meetings responded.

The results of that survey are contained in a pamphlet of 58 pages, edited by Kenneth Ives, with the title New Friends Speak: Why and How They Join Friends (Quakers) in the Mid-1970s. That booklet is an informative, fascinating, and provocative publication, containing much data on membership in the Religious Society of Friends. No brief summary can do it justice. But

some pertinent facts and trends can be cited from it.

That survey revealed that most of the new members were highly educated and that a large proportion were in upper income occupations; over half were in managerial, technical, or professional positions — especially teaching.

The paths by which they came to Friends were numerous. Oddly, nearly one in eight had not heard of Quakers until they reached adulthood; some thought Friends no longer existed. A few were curious about Ouakers because they had some ancestor who was a Friend, Several had heard about Quakers in college courses and had followed up on that introduction. A few admired Friends because of their opposition to the Vietnam War or because of other activities for peace and social justice. Many had had some contacts with Quakers through the American Friends Service Committee, the Friends Committee on National Legislation, or

other organizations. Some had read the writings of Howard Brinton, Rufus Jones, Thomas Kelly, Douglas Steere, Elton Trueblood, or others.

Significantly, the largest group became interested in Quakerism because of someone they knew and admired who was a Friend. So the statement of George Fox that "The lives and conversations of Friends did preach," still holds true.

7. Some Thoughts About Membership in the Religious Society of Friends Today

Often we can learn from the experiences and thoughts of others. That is as true of the question of membership as it is on many other baffling issues.

Therefore we are presenting in this section the thinking of some Friends and Friends groups from recent times on several aspects of the question of membership, as printed here and there.

Let us start with Henry Cadbury's wry but pungent comment that "our criterion of a good Quaker in the last half of the Seventeenth Century was whether he was in trouble with the authorities, which means of course whether he acted in such a way as would get him into trouble with the authorities. First or last, a good Quaker then would be sure to do so." Then he goes on to bring that statement up-to-date, wondering aloud "whether in the last half of the Twentieth Century we are not too sure not to do so."

Then, writing about the variety of Quakers in the early days of that movement, he points to such contrasting figures as Fox and Barclay, Nayler and Fox, and Penington and Whitehead, commenting that "The Society would have lost its richness and strength if it had been reduced to a single type."

In a little pamphlet issued many years ago (probably in the 1930s), Jane Rushmore wrote a chapter on *The Meaning of Membership to Individuals*. In it she commented that "Responsible persons

are accepted into membership in the Society of Friends upon their own request if they show an understanding of and a sympathetic interest in the profession and practices of the Society." She then went on to write about the testimonies being important, saying that "Membership implies interest in upholding them." Her only reference, however, to specific testimonies is to the section of the Discipline on them. Later she laid great stress on the responsibility of members to carry out the work of the local Meeting and of larger bodies of Friends, such as the yearly meeting and the Friends General Conference, of which she was a devoted and untiring worker.

Then, in 1950, Clarence Pickett, in turn a pastor, pastoral secretary, professor of religion at Earlham College, and for many years executive secretary of the American Friends Service Committee, gave the Quaker Lecture at Western Yearly Meeting in Indiana on the theme *The Meaning of Membership*

in the Society of Friends. Drawing upon his scholarly background and knowledge of the history of the Christian Church and of the Religious Society of Friends, he pointed out the struggle in Paul's Epistles and in the Book of Acts between two concepts of membership — the inclusive and the exclusive.

Further on he maintained that "At the very heart of our belief and practice is the claim that religion is a matter of the transformed life and that such organizational structure as may be built must accommodate itself to and be useful in nourishing that life of the spirit."

At the third Friends World Conference, held in Oxford, England in 1952, a statement was adopted which stated that "The test for membership should not be doctrinal agreement, nor adherence to certain testimonies, but evidence of sincere seeking and striving for the Truth, together with an understanding of the lines along which Friends are seeking that Truth."

In his volume on Friends for Three

Hundred Years, published in 1952, Howard Brinton had surprisingly little to say about membership. But one point he did emphasize was the centrality of the sense of community in any Meeting. Of that important facet of Quakerism he wrote, "As membership in the Meeting is membership in a community, the test of membership is compatability with the Meeting community."

In 1964 Thomas R. Bodine delivered a talk at the Friends World Committee meeting in Ireland on The Meaning of Membership in the Religious Society of Friends in which he said that "The criteria are intent and commitment." In elaborating on his theme, he asserted that "The applicant must want to be a follower of Jesus, to seek Truth, and to live according to the relevations he receives." Asking how one tests a person's intent, he said "We require that he attend regularly and that he try to understand the testimonies. The applicant need not necessarily subscribe to all the testimonies, but he must know

something about them and he must be willing to let others witness to them until he, himself, is ready for them."

One of the volumes printed as a part of the preparation for the fourth Friends World Conference at Guilford College in North Carolina, in 1967, was called No Time But the Present. In a section of it on The Community of Friends, Wilmer A. Cooper of the Earlham School of Religion, commented that "One of the major problems in the church today is that too little is expected of those who have committed themselves to membership. Where little is expected, little will be given in return. Moreover, the demands that are made often seem to be busy work, rather than involvement in really important things." Further on he remarked that membership "should liberate persons to participate in a new life of freedom rather than make them feel restricted and circumscribed."

In that same volume Ormerod Greenwood, a prominent English Friend, wrote on The Nurture of the Society of Friends. There he said "It may be that for continuity and for legal purposes we have to retain formal membership; and it has the great advantage that it represents a step of commitment which many need and are strengthened by. But let us make as little of membership as possible and keep our Society as an 'open-ended' community, such as it was during its first hundred years, counting as Quakers all who journey with us."

Further on he wrote, "Let us not seek unity in uniformity of thought and opinion; for we shall never get them; but in the true accord of Christian love. Let them who come amongst us feel joy and concord; for in the words of Isaac Penington, 'Our life is love and peace and tenderness; and bearing one another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations against another, but praying one for another and helping one another up with a tender hand.'"

In a book devoted to replies or reactions to that volume, entitled Seek,

Find. Share. Thomas J. Mullen, wrote an essay on The Meaning of Membership in which he said that he agreed with Ormerod Greenwood, pointing out that in the past Friends had "too often set up standards of membership which merely served as bad reasons for keeping people out of the Society who most needed the spiritual strength and help of the Quaker community." Nevertheless Mullen maintained that we should "make a great deal of membership, not 'as little as possible,' " pointing out that we should make membership "a very serious business indeed." but being "careful to choose the right criteria."

Perhaps those two Friends were not as far apart in their concerns as it might at first seem.

Especially helpful to many people has been an article by Edmund P. Hillpern, a New York City Friend, which the Advancement Committee of New York Yearly Meeting reprinted from the Friends Journal in 1967 on The Minimum Quaker. To Hillpern the four

principles which constitute A Minimum Quaker are: (1) The Inner Light, (2) The Corporate Search, (3) The Living Witness, and (4) The Joyful Hope.

Perhaps the best place for a seeker or an applicant to turn to discover what is meant by "the Quaker Way of Life" is to the Oueries and the Advices in the yearly meeting Discipline or book of Faith and Practice. As this writer said in his recent volume on Ouakerism: A Guide to the Religious Society of Friends, "They are questions and suggestions to promote contemplation, reflection, and evaluation. The Queries, in particular, are suited to the searching mood of Friends at their best, as they are broad, open-ended questions to promote self-examination under the leadership of the Spirit. They are non-dogmatic, nonhortatory, and non-threatening. They are intended not to discourage but to encourage; not meant to put down individuals or groups, but to lift them to new levels of living. They are primarily positive rather than negative in tone.

... Taken collectively, this cluster of practices are intended to encourage Friends, individually and collectively, to hold up their lives to the Light. They are meant to prick our consciences, to prod us in our day-to-day practices, and to promote the kind of God-directed lives worth living."

Several individuals and a few Meetings which have seen the guidelines worked out by the Committee on Ministry and Oversight of the Brooklyn, New York, Friends Meeting in the 1970s, have found them useful, especially for groups with a wide spectrum of members and attenders, with a so-called "liberal point of view" dominant. In an all-day workshop, that group had what early Friends might have called "a threshing session." Their concluding Minute mentioned the following points as ones which should be considered in interviewing applicants for membership in their group:

... commitment to a spiritual search, individually and as a part of the

- Meeting, and acceptance of the broad spectrum of beliefs represented in that group.
- ... familiarity with the history and practices of Friends, including the New York Yearly Meeting's Faith and Practice.
- . . . attendance at Meetings for Worship and the valuing of this type of worship.
- ... attendance at several Meetings for Business and an understanding of the spirit and procedures of such sessions.
- ... familiarity with Friends' testimonies and ongoing concerns and support of most of them.
- ... willingness to participate in the life of the Meeting in regard to (a) the Meeting for Worship, (b) the Meeting for Business, (c) committee work, and (d) financial support according to one's means.
- ... willingness to give and to receive support as a part of a seeking, growing, caring religious community.

As a participant in that session, this writer would have been glad to have had a reference to the importance to Friends of their Judaic-Christian heritage and to the centrality of the life of Jesus. But there was not unity on that statement, in part because there were several in our group who had rebelled against the narrow theological interpretations of the faith in which they were indoctrinated in their earlier years and had found spiritual strength in the non-dogmatic approach of Friends.

It should be noted here that several yearly meetings in the United States expect their applicants for membership to attest to their belief in Jesus Christ as their Savior, and state this as a requirement of membership in their Disciplines. Liberal Friends generally adhere to the importance of Jesus without demanding any such statement by their applicants.

8. The Procedure for Applying for Membership in the Religious Society of Friends

When an individual feels ready to become a member of the Society of Friends, he or she is expected to write a letter to the Monthly Meeting, stating that desire and giving a brief account of his or her journey to Quakerism.

Those letters, incidentally, are often very moving, and a collection of them would reveal the many paths people have taken in their search for truth and personal fulfillment.

The applicant's letter is usually referred to the Committee on Ministry and Oversight and a small group (usually two or three) appointed to visit with the person or persons requesting membership.

That interview (or in some cases a series of meetings) should not be a Quaker Inquisition or a traumatic experience for the applicant. Nor should it be a confrontation.

Conversely it should not be merely a pleasant social occasion with the visitors shunting aside the main purpose of their get-together, assuming that anyone who applies will automatically be accepted.

Every effort should be made to make the applicant (or applicants) comfortable, ready to raise questions and hesitations about membership. The meeting should be a dialogue characterized by seeking and sharing on the part of everyone. Often the members of the Visiting Committee can gain as much from the session as the applicant, — learning as well as teaching.

In addition to the points already mentioned in the paragraphs about the guidelines of the Brooklyn Meeting's Committee on Ministry and Oversight, there are several matters which might well be raised.

Some Visiting Committees may want to inquire whether there are any objections to this step on the part of one's parents and/or of one's spouse. If there are children, the visitors should be clear as to whether they are also applying for membership and if they are, whether they should be considered as associate or full members. Also, the Visiting Committee should explore with the applicant the reading he or she has done, the other Quaker meetings visited, and in what other Friends' gatherings this person has taken part, as membership is really in the Religious Society of Friends, even though it is recorded in the local Meeting.

Usually we think about the effect on the Meeting of the admission of an applicant. Perhaps Visiting Committee members, individuals on the Committee on Ministry and Oversight, and the members of the Monthly Meeting should also bear in mind what might happen to an applicant if he or she is rejected. That is an important point which is often overlooked.

When the Visiting Committee reports to the Committee on Ministry and Oversight, they may urge acceptance of the applicant immediately. But they may suggest that he or she do more reading, attend more Meetings for Worship and/or Business, visit other Quaker groups, or ponder some aspect of Quakerism a little longer.

If the Committee on Ministry and Oversight agrees to recommend membership, they forward their decision to the Monthly Meeting, where the final action is taken.

If (or when) the application for membership is accepted, the Monthly Meeting (through the clerk) welcomes the new Friend, the recorder is asked to enter his or her name on the Meeting's rolls, and a small Welcoming Committee is appointed to mark this important event. In some Meetings the clerk presents the new member with a small gift, such as a Bible, a book on Quakerism or on some religious topic, or a corsage or boutonnaire. Often a few Friends feel moved to say a few words of welcome publicly.

Occasionally the entire Meeting

honors the new member or members at some future date. Sometimes a special event celebrates all those taken into membership in the past year.

Friends do not believe in elaborate ceremonies but such an occasion seems to many to warrant some simple form of recognition as a significant milestone on the spiritual journey of an individual, a couple, or a family. After all, membership has a deeply significant meaning to many of us. It is a privilege which carries with it the deep commitment and the contribution of the talents of the applicant or applicants to the local Meeting, to the Religious Society of Friends, and to the wider world.

9. Some Suggested Questions for Consideration

- A. Did you find any arresting or provocative statement in this pamphlet? If so, what was it? What special thoughts did it evoke?
- B. Are there any absolute essentials in Quakerism with which you feel an

- applicant for membership must agree? If so, what are they? If not, why not?
- C. What is your attitude toward "birthright membership" in the Religious Society of Friends?
- D. Have you ever realized that some birthright Friends resent the division into birthright and convinced Friends? Why do they feel so strongly about this?
- E. On pages 13 through 16 a few reasons some Friends were attracted to Quakerism were mentioned. Which apply to you or to members of your Meeting?
- F. What is your attitude toward "associate" membership? Why?
- G. In most Meetings young people are asked to decide at the age of 18 whether they would like to retain their membership with Friends and to be made full members if they are then associates. How do you feel about 18 as the age when this important decision should be made?

- (you may wish to ask some of your young people about their reactions on their point.)
- H. If you are a so-called "convinced Friend," what was your reaction to the meeting with your Visiting Committee? In what ways might that experience have been more meaningful to you and them?
- I. What is the practice of your Meeting in welcoming new members with some special celebration? How might this welcoming process be improved?
- J. If you were to edit a sentence or paragraph, or even an entire section of this pamphlet, what changes in emphasis and/or wording would you make? Why? (The author would welcome such suggestions for consideration if this pamphlet is reprinted sometime in the future.)

10. A Brief Reading List

1. Abrams, Irwin Friends and the

- Seeker. Friends General Conference, undated. 6 pp.
- 2. Bodine, Thomas R. The Meaning of Membership in the Religious Society of Friends. New England Yearly Meeting, 1964. 9 pp.
- Cadbury, Henry J. The Character of a Quaker. Pendle Hill Publications, 1959. 32 pp. Based on the William Penn Lecture.
- 4. Cooper, Wilmer A. The Nature of the Friends Meeting, in No Time But This Present. Friends World Committee for Consultation, 1965. 239 pp. Pp. 93-101.
- Greenwood, Ormerod "The Nurture of the Society of Friends" a chapter in No Time But This Present.
 Friends World Committee for Consultation, 1967. 238 pp. Pp. 102-109.
- 6. Hillpern, Edmund P. *The Minimum Quaker*. The Advancement Committee of New York Yearly Meeting (from an article in the *Friends Journal* July 15, 1967.) 3 pp.
- 7. Ives, Kenneth New Friends Speak:

- How and Why They Join Friends (Quakers) in the Mid 1970s. Progressive Publisher. 1980. 68 pp.
- 8. Kenworthy, Leonard S. (Compiler) Quaker Quotations on Faith and Practice. Friends General Conference, 1983. 187 pp. Pp. 75-77 on membership.
- 9. Mullen, Thomas J. "The Meaning of Membership" Chapter 13 in Seek, Find, Share. Friends World Committee for Consultation, 1967. 159 pp.
- 10. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting How to Become a Member of the Religious Society of Friends. The Representative Meeting of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1970. 6 pp.
- Pickett, Clarence E. The Meaning of Membership in the Society of Friends. Western Yearly Meeting, 1959. 15 pp. The Quaker Lecture.