

“The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism” Revisited

From Kenneth Boulding to John Bellers

Keith Helmuth

Based on presentations made for the Quaker Studies Programme,
Canadian Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends 2009

*Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the
certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.*

Vaclav Havel

Part One

Quaker Memes and the Human Prospect

“The evolutionary potential of Quakerism” is a phrase that has become a Quaker meme. Kenneth Boulding introduced this concept into the Quaker lexicon in his 1964 James Backhouse Lecture (Australia Yearly Meeting). A meme is to cultural life what a gene is to biological life. A meme is a unit of self-replicating cultural information that spreads from imagination to imagination and from generation to generation. A meme operates as a container, a capsule, or carrier for a story.¹

Over the years, the story embedded in Kenneth Boulding’s phrase has been a kind of North Star in my attempt to understand the significance of the Religious Society of Friends in the history of religious culture and progressive social change. Boulding’s lecture mostly looked to the future and what Friends may yet contribute to human betterment. In revisiting this Quaker meme I will be moving from Kenneth Boulding back in time and cultural history to John Bellers (1654-1725).

John Bellers, although not well known in Quaker studies, was amazingly prescient with regard to the evolutionary potential of Quakerism. The understanding of human betterment that emerged from his Quaker worldview is simply astonishing for the times in which he lived. His insight into the significance of universal education, vocational training, public healthcare, social fairness, political economy, finance and investment, governance, and international peacemaking grew into an integral conception of human betterment the likes of which had never before been seen and advanced with such practical proposals. In so far, as we look to the past for guidance and inspiration from early Friends, I would like to bring John Bellers more fully into view. My project here is to show how John Bellers stands at the beginning of the evolutionary potential of Quakerism with regard to influencing the common good of the human prospect.

In thinking about the human prospect, we all know the bad news. We all know that peak oil, climate change, and biodiversity loss, among other things, are now the grim reapers of the capital driven growth economy. We all know that we are in for a multi-dimensional system failure beyond which the human prospect, and the prospect of the whole commonwealth of life, is very unclear. We all know that the failure of our political, business and cultural leaders to act decades ago on the range of issues that are now converging into civilizational breakdown is the context in which we live. We

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

all know that nationalisms, fundamentalisms and cultural polarizations of various kinds are thwarting much needed global cooperation.

I am not minimizing these realities, nor will they be absent from what I have to say. But for the moment I would like to use a lens that focuses in a different way. I want to bring forward and highlight an example from within the Quaker heritage that exemplifies the evolutionary potential of Quakerism through history and into our present time. John Bellers example, and the heritage to which he contributed, has a lot to do with how we might effectively engage in the struggle for a livable human future.

By way of beginning I want to tell you the story of a conversation I had in California a few years ago. This is a story I have been looking for an opportunity to tell. I should tell it in Philadelphia but I haven't quite gotten up the courage to do so.

In 2006 Pacific Yearly Meeting hosted a retreat at the Woolman Center in the foothills of the north central Sierra Nevada range on the theme "Holding Earth in the Light." They asked me to attend from Philadelphia as a resource person and plenary speaker. Near the end of the retreat about a dozen of us were sitting in conversation on a grape vine shaded patio at the end of yet another lovely California day. The subject turned to differences between Friends Meetings in different parts of the continent. In particular, the differences between Friends on the East and West coasts came up. Someone said, half jokingly, "We want to know if we are doing Quakerism right out here." Before I could answer, another particularly quick-witted Friend chimed in, "Oh yes, Keith, tell us what is it like living in the dead center of Quakerism?"

Now, as you can imagine this double-entendre gave us all a good laugh. Californians generally have the feeling they are living on the cutting edge of everything, and, indeed, they often are, but here was a question that cut both ways: a little frontier brashness along with the recognition of deep heritage.

Concern for Quaker heritage is not, of course, confined to Philadelphia or England. All of us, wherever we live, if we have studied the history of Friends experience, thought, and action, have a special sense of the significance of the Quaker heritage. This heritage has a variety of levels of expression ranging from highly personal spirituality to an almost uncanny group mysticism, from an intensely collaborative decision making process to a core of social equity values based on a deep sense of right relationship. This list is just a beginning.

Now it will come as no surprise, since I have recently helped author a book with the title "*Right Relationship: Building a Whole Earth Economy*," that the part of the Quaker heritage most on my mind is the contribution Friends have made in the realm of social ethics and economic equity. Another way to think about this focus is to characterize it as witness and action for "human betterment." Please understand that when I use the concept of "human betterment" I see it embedded in the well being of the whole commonwealth of life, which is why the book, *Right Relationship*, is constructed on the concept of "the whole Earth economy."

It is also important to make sure we do not confuse human betterment with the idea of "progress." Progress, as most often exemplified by the "American dream," has generally been seen as the continual availability of an increasing diversity of consumer goods, the pursuit of ever increasing convenience, and the attainment of ever-higher levels of personal care and security. And now we

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

must add, instantly available and continuous entertainment as an emerging category in this utopian dream world that is consuming the planet.

Quaker educator and social philosopher, Morris Mitchell, and Quaker economist Kenneth Boulding first began using the expression “human betterment” in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. They developed this concept as a way of talking about positive scenarios of social and economic development that did not rely on the idea of progress as defined by consumerism and an ever-expanding Gross Domestic Product. Although now used in many non-Quaker contexts, the concept of human betterment, as far as I have been able to tell, came into the socio-economic dialogue from this Quaker source. It is another Quaker meme.

In his 1964 James Backhouse Lecture, Kenneth Boulding, brought human betterment and the evolutionary potential of Quakerism together in a particularly cogent way. This lecture, originally titled “The Quaker Mutation,” is constructed around a biological analogy that clearly anticipates the concept of the meme – a package of information and guidance that structures cultural transmission and development. In this lecture, Kenneth Boulding asks and answers the question, “What is the evolutionary potential of Quakerism?” For publication as a Pendle Hill Pamphlet he changed the title to *The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism* – a more suggestive and intriguing title.² (See Addendum)

It certainly intrigued me when I first saw it shortly after publication. I have been re-reading and pondering it ever since. This lecture, while deceptively easy to read, lays out big concepts in both scientific and cultural understanding and relates them to the Quaker story and to a vision of the Quaker task in the transition from civilization to, what Boulding calls, “post-civilization.” Already in 1964 Boulding was thinking sobering thoughts about the human prospect and about what kind of changes in social and economic systems would be required for continued human adaptation to the complex ecosystems of Earth.³

A year later he introduced the metaphor “spaceship Earth” and started asking what kind of social and economic behavior makes sense once we realize that Earth is essentially a closed system except for the sunlight energy that continuously bathes the planet, fueling the process of photosynthesis that is the basis for the entire life system – the true wealth of the whole Earth economy.

Kenneth Boulding was one of the first social scientists, and certainly the first leading economist, who understood that all progressive thinking and action with regard to human adaptation and human betterment must now start with the way Earth’s ecosystems actually work, and that if we continue to pit human economic and social development against the fundamental realities of Earth’s resource and energy dynamics we are sure to lose. In the forty plus years since he began thinking and writing about this reality, the high energy, industrial-commercial way of life has continued to do just that and we are now losing big time.

Kenneth Boulding drew a series of conclusions from the spaceship metaphor to which he devoted the rest of his life.

- The human economy must shift from a non-renewable material and energy throughput system to a closed loop system of material re-use fueled by sunlight energy.

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

- A two-deck space ship with “haves” on the upper deck and the “have-nots” on the lower deck will not work. It will become increasingly unmanageable and crash. Spaceship Earth will work only if new a equity system can be installed.
- You cannot have war on a spaceship. With the population and technology now on board, new social and political systems of decision-making, cooperation, coordination, regulation, and enforcement are required at the global level for the human enterprise to remain functional.

The last two of these items stand fully within the Quaker testimonies of equality and peace. The first is something new on our collective ethical horizon to which I will return.

A New Horizon of Learning

In my study of the history of the Religious Society Friends, I have come to a focus of understanding that has helped me see the origin of Quakerism, and its contribution to religious and social development, in a particularly luminescent way.

When George Fox came down from Pendle Hill and began his days of teaching, a unique combination of events and circumstances gave rise to the Religious Society of Friends. A state of high cultural ferment was at work in mid 17th Century England. Spiritual exploration and social revolution were in the air and on the ground. There was a rising dissatisfaction with orthodox theology and official church structure. For some people Fox’s message was electric. Whole gatherings of listeners were, apparently, suddenly opened to a new spiritual horizon. What was that new horizon? What was that step up in spiritual consciousness and motivational power that Fox and his followers experienced?

George Fox was not the only one, nor even the first, in whom the realization arose that true religion was found not in outward forms or particular language, but in inward communion with Divine Presence. Following in the wake of Luther’s Reformation, the Anabaptist movement, a century earlier, set out to recover, as they saw it, this essential gospel message. The experience of personal, direct relationship to God, and the gathering of believers as Church were the pivot points around which the Anabaptist movement was organized.

There is, however, in Fox’s recovery of the gospel message, an emphasis that distinguishes it from the Anabaptists, and, indeed, from all previous Christian theology. For Fox it was not just a direct relation to God with respect to salvation, but the immediate experience of direct teaching by the inward Christ – the experience of continuing revelation. His announcement that “Christ had come to teach his people himself”⁴ *shifted the basis of spiritual life from a preoccupation with personal security to an engagement with the process of learning.*

Into a milieu of dogmatic theology and rigid church structure already under siege, Fox projected, through his reinterpretation of scripture, a new horizon of learning, a new horizon of spiritual life – the prospect of learning directly from the immediate counsel of the indwelling Christ.

Fox’s insistence that a teaching-learning process is fundamental in authentic Christian life seems to me the key to the surge in spiritual energy and motivational power experienced by early Friends.

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

His message implanted a kind of central nervous system in the Body of Christ that had not been there before. His mode of open worship established a method of access, a discipline of listening and learning. Growth replaced security as the dominant metaphor of Christian experience. This continuing revelation found its focus in a sense of right relationship that has permeated the entire ethical horizon of spiritual development since that time.

It is important to realize that while Fox opened this new horizon of learning from a biblical base, the process, as such, is not uniquely Christian. This openness to learning is a fundamental potential of human intelligence.

Fox was influential and the Society of Friends flourished not because they got Christianity “right” – that dream of all reformers – when everybody else had it wrong, even if many early Friends may have thought that was the case. Quakerism flourished and has endured because it moved from a static conception of spiritual life to an open horizon of learning. Many early Friends had the gift to see, later epitomized in John Woolman, that what they were about was universal to the species, the potential of both genders of every rank, race, culture, and creed.

This shift in guidance from a fixed theological formula to an open horizon of on going learning is now characteristic of many religious communities. We see it on every hand. For example, a few years ago, at Christmas, when we went to visit the animals in the live crèche at the United Church of Christ at 4th and Race Streets in Philadelphia, we saw a banner in the door yard that quoted the old time radio comedienne, Gracie Allen: It said; “Don’t put a period where God puts a comma.” Below these words of theological wisdom, even larger letters proclaimed; “God is still speaking!” This shift in theological viewpoint was launched into the Christian tradition in large part by Quakerism.

It is no accident that Quakers have been pioneers in education and in the fields of human development. Nor is it surprising that many Friends have been attracted to the sciences and that scientists have been attracted to Quakerism. We may wonder why so much modern social analysis, so many programs of experiential learning, so many problem solving processes, and so many contemporary programs of social action that have no direct link to Friends, seem, never-the-less, like they come right out of Quakerism. In a real sense, they have. If we study the shift in Western culture from a set worldview to an evolutionary perspective, from the certainty of eternal knowledge to an open horizon of learning, it is not difficult to see that the innovation in spiritual life that Friends launched is one of the primary sources of this change.

The cultural world of 17th Century England was certainly primed in a variety of ways for this shift, but its articulation in Quakerism, and its advance within Quakerism’s enduring social form, is an especially notable factor. This factor is what Kenneth Boulding calls the evolutionary potential of Quakerism.

To put this scenario into still further perspective it is important to understand something of the context that shaped Fox’s outlook and enabled him to provide the catalytic leadership that, along with others, resulted in the Religious Society of Friends and the enduring quality of Quakerism.

“The World Turned Upside Down”

The world of English culture, religion, and politics that confronted George Fox when his youthful mind began its quest to make sense of what was happening around him, was a swirling cavalcade of chaotic change that historian Christopher Hill characterizes as “the world turned upside down.”⁵ When the Monarchy was overthrown and the King shockingly beheaded, the effect was much more than that of a political revolution. Monarchy embodied the principle of Divine Order. When Divine Order was dispensed with at this level, the authority of the established Church was also undercut.

A restiveness had been creeping into English religious life from the continent for some time. The Lutheran Reformation, and the subsequent Anabaptist Reformation in the previous century, had spawned a growing movement of religious pluralism. The technology of printing had made the Bible widely available and thus a kind of freethinking about religion began to percolate outside the dominion of the Church and its priestly class.

In England, important elements of this re-evaluation of religious life became associated with the Republican Revolution in the belief that, should it be successful, a radical new order of equality, wealth sharing, and social class “leveling” would be the result. Gerard Winstanley was one of the early and primary voices calling for this new order. From the late 1640’s through the early 1650’s he wrote a series of pamphlets and books arguing that Cromwell and the New Model Army, now in power, should fulfill the promise of the Republican Revolution with regard to rights and resources for the Common people and the poor of England.⁶

Eventually, he moved from argument to action and led a group of like-minded people onto the Commons at St George’s Hill in Surrey with the intent of establishing an agricultural community that would exemplify the right of Common people to earn their livelihood from “the common Treasury of earth.” This farming enterprise was called “a dig,” and the movement became known as “the diggers.” It was a deliberate, non-violent, direct action movement for land reform, and it is legendary in the history of social change. Neither Cromwell nor his generals in the New Model Army were inclined to support Winstanley’s claims for the Revolution despite the fact that he, and many other Commoners had previously joined the Republican Army, fought for the cause, and insured Cromwell’s success.

Winstanley’s movement posed a real threat to the class structure and the control of land, and it was defeated both in the courts to which he appealed, and by physical attacks from both soldiers and vigilantes. Winstanley and his community remained steadfastly non-violent. He believed that it would only be through non-violent persuasion that their cause could succeed. During this whole time he wrote and published a steady stream of pamphlets that were widely circulated and eagerly read by many people who shared his vision and aspirations for religious freedom and economic reform. But the prospect of land reform was too much for the Gentry and, eventually, the Diggers’ farming community was attacked and destroyed by Cromwell’s soldiers.

Immediately after the Digger movement failed and was disbanded, George Fox began the journey’s that resulted in the beginnings of the Quaker movement. Fox and his message became a new point of focus for the stirrings and struggles in which many people, including the Diggers were engaged. Although Fox’s Journal does not mention Winstanley, it would have been impossible, in the context of the time, for him to have been unaware of the older man’s work, or to have been uninfluenced by

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

his widely circulated pamphlets and books. These publications were, according to Winstanley scholar, David Boulton, the talk of the nation.

Fox had been on a quest, engaging, by his own account, all the resources he could find in an effort to satisfy his mental turmoil and troubled spirit. The critical “opening” he experienced, in the shelter of a great tree, in which his mind was clarified and his spirit aligned with a vision of “Christ having come to teach his people himself”, occurred within the context of all he had most certainly absorbed in his questing years. Figures like Winstanley and Fox emerged with enduring articulation of a changing world view and a new mode of religious adaptation, but it is important to remember they emerged from an historic context that had already been unfolding for over a century.

When you read Winstanley’s work you find language, concepts, and expressions that are common in later Quaker writings. For example, he speaks of “the experimental knowledge of Christ”, “a teacher within.” He further explains that, “Not the Apostles’ writings but the spirit that dwelt in them and inspired their hearts gives life and peace.” Historian, David Boulton, points out that Winstanley writings developed a fully rounded articulation of the religious radicalism that was emerging at this time. It includes “an anti-Calvinist theological universalism; the language of the ‘inner light’ and ‘seed’; a non-literal or metaphorical interpretation of scripture (understood as secondary rather than primary); an apocalyptic expectation that a New Age was about to dawn; and assertion of the rights of women and servants to preach and teach.” Even details of behaviour, such as the refusal of “hat honour,” appear in Winstanley’s writings and in his court appearances. All this was part of an intellectual and spiritual revolution that was emerging in this time in English society. It was widespread and for many folks irresistible. It was like the door of a dark room in the mind being thrown open to a landscape of sunlight and verdant promise.

Luther’s and Calvin’s reformations congealed into new ecclesiastical straightjackets. The Radical Reformation of the Anabaptists devolved into personal piety and security enclaves. It was only within the radical wing of the English Reformation that economic and social justice – fair access to the means of life and life development resources – became part of the religious vision, or in theological terms, God’s will. This was something new. This was the beginning of the end for the divide between the sacred and secular. This was a vision of a new order based on respect, cooperation, and devotion to the common good – again, in theological terms, the love of God experienced in community.

In Gerard Winstanley’s vision and thinking, and in the Digger movement, the potential of this new order emerged in startling completeness. But those who held power ruthlessly crushed it. Even so, we marvel at the tenacity and spiritual strength that enabled those folks to hold out as they did in non-violent witness based in universal love.

As the movement for radical religious and social reform was picked up in Quakerism, it did not attempt to directly repeat Winstanley’s challenge to the social and economic order. But – and this is my message – it was not lost. Although Fox and his compatriots – the “valiant sixty” – were focused primarily, at first, on the new way of understanding and experiencing spiritual learning and guidance, and then, later, on organization, communication and discipline, the social and economic realities around them were not out of mind. The Quakers mode of direct perception, their openness to learning, and the ethos of the earlier movements from which many Quakers came, continued to inform and deepen their social conscience.

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

After it became clear that Cromwell and the New Model Army, in which many Quakers apparently served, would not challenge the class structure and the Gentry's control of land, the social and economic witness of Friends became a bit muted. Friends were being repeatedly arrested, tried and jailed for various infractions of laws governing the practice of religion. They were becoming numerous enough to pose the threat of sedition to the authorities. Had they, in addition, taken up social class and economic inequality as major issues they might well have been crushed like Winstanley and the Diggers. That piece of recent history would have certainly been fresh in their minds.

Winstanley disappears from history, but then turns up, along with family members, in the record book of a Quaker burial ground. This information only recently came to light, and it establishes that Winstanley must have joined Friends. A Meeting would not have buried non-members nor recorded it in Meeting records. Apparently Winstanley, perhaps in later life, found a spiritual home in Quakerism.⁷

By the end of the 17th Century, the initial growth of Quakerism was over and the Religious Society of Friends was settling into the forms and disciplines of an established dissenting sect. Quakerism was still regarded by many as heretical and a danger to society, but persecution had mostly ceased. Friends became increasingly successful in various business enterprises, and their place in society became ever more settled. By the early 18th Century there can be found complaints that attendance at Meetings in London were receding from their peak vitality.

Into this time comes John Bellers with a way of thinking and acting that lifts the evolutionary potential of Quakerism fully into a vision of human betterment for the common good. John Bellers is little known to Friends, for reasons I will go into later, and my goal here is to somewhat redress this eclipse. Generally, as we come down the Quaker pantheon from Fox, and Naylor, we have Barclay and Pennington on the theological side, and Penn and Woolman on the social and economic side. This is only a rough characterization. Both Penn and Woolman exemplify a deep universalist approach to piety as well.

John Bellers should be firmly inserted into the list of those who are seen as key Quaker figures in the ethical and socioeconomic development of the modern world, and, in particular, placed among those who have been effective in transcending the unfortunate dichotomy between sacred and secular long cultivated in Christendom. Transcending this dichotomy has been a cardinal characteristic of Quakerism. It has not been a matter of Friends setting out to accomplish a theological deconstruction project, but rather that the holistic ethos of Quaker spirituality transcended the distinction between sacred and secular as a matter of integrity from the beginning. Integrity is integrity whether speaking in Meeting or giving good weight in the marketplace. The guide is always the same and is operational from one end of life's activities to the other, and applies to everything in between. This is what convicted John Woolman that he could no longer write bills of sale for the ownership transfer of slaves. John Bellers, some fifty years earlier took this holistic Quaker approach – one might begin to say, this systems approach – and applied it to a whole range of economic and social realities of his time.

John Bellers and the Quaker Ethos

John Bellers was a generation younger than George Fox. He was born in 1654, and died at age 71 in 1725. He was born into a London Quaker family of some means and married into a Quaker family of even greater means. His career as a business person was in the cloth trade which prospered, allowing him a considerable margin of time and energy which he devoted to the Society of Friends, and to the study and analysis of the religious, social and political realities of his time. A few biographical details taken from George Clarke's book, *John Bellers: His Life, Times & Writings*,⁸ will provide a further sense of this remarkable man.

Although nothing is known about his formative years, it is clear from his writings that he was well educated and widely read. He quotes or refers to Aristotle, Cato, Caesar, Cicero, Confucius, John Everard, Galen, Hippocrates, Plato, and Tauler. Like many Quakers at the time, he had a deep knowledge of the Bible from which he frequently quoted with great facility to support his arguments.

Quakerism had won many converts in the city of London during this time and Bellers grew up immersed in a vibrant and sometimes contentious Quaker culture. He would have been in association with many strong-minded Friends, some from the Leveler and Digger movements, some who had been members of Cromwell's army, and some who had already suffered severe persecution. He himself was twice arrested and fined for "riotous assembly" - which could be simply gathering with Friends at a time or place in which such gatherings had been legally prohibited. He saw, too, the terrible conditions in which the poor of London lived and died. It is estimated that over 20% of England's population then lived in wretched poverty. In London it was likely higher.

By the time he was twenty-five, Bellers was actively involved in Quaker affairs. In 1686 he married Frances Fettiplace. After Frances' father died, Bellers and his family - eventually totaling six children - moved into her family home, Coln St Aldwy in Gloucestershire. This residence, a manor house, was frequented by Friends coming and going, including George Fox, William Penn, John Pennington and Thomas Ellwood.

In 1717 tragedy struck John Bellers. His wife, Frances, his daughter Elizabeth, and his young son Francis all died, probably from smallpox, and he was suddenly alone. His older children were married or on their own. His oldest son, Fettiplace, turned out to be a disappointment. He left Friends, became an indifferent lawyer, and was inattentive to business and land interests that were entrusted to him. James Logan, befriended Fettiplace on behalf of his father, but it seems to have made little difference. In these later years, even with failing health, John Bellers continued his study of social and economic conditions, matched them to the ethical demands of his faith, and renewed his call to Quakers, in particular, to act effectively on behalf of the poor.

The conditions for the poor in those times were utterly appalling. England had entered the early stages of the industrial and commercial transformation that was to produce the world's first "modern" society. A burgeoning empire built on military, naval, manufacturing, and commercial power offered the prospect of increased wealth to the already wealthy. Making money became the obsession of the times. Parliament was totally the instrument of landed Gentry and rising commercial interests. Yeoman, Commoners, and Peasants had no voice in government. Workers were viewed simply as raw material for industrial use and not as human beings with development

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

potential. Workers were given only “starvation wages” and long hours in order that investment profits could be as high as possible. Rural families were being driven to the cities by the on going enclosures of common lands. Large numbers of people lived in continual insecurity, illness, conditions of violence, and exploitation. Abandoned children were commonplace, prostitution rampant, theft common. Education and healthcare for the poor was not even considered. The Parish workhouses were wretched places and often cruelly run by persons without feeling or moral concern.

Bellers looked on all this and set his mind to the task of understanding and his heart on a prayer for reform. It came to him that without poor labourers there would be no wealth for the rich. Gerard Winstanley sixty-three years earlier had written; “No man can be rich but he must be rich either by his own labours, or by the labours of other men.” Bellers, in a typical flourish of succinctness, said: “The labours of the Poor are the Mines of the Rich.”⁹

In 1695 John Bellers began a campaign of writing and publishing that he continued to the year he died. “Campaign” is the right word. Bellers did not write with literary ambition, although he was an accomplished writer. He did not entertain philosophic stature although he was fully equipped conceptually and analytically to have done so. Being a Quaker he could not, of course, embark on a political career although he would have undoubtedly been a splendid parliamentarian. Something was working within him that drew all his talents and energy into a particular kind of focus, a focus that has little in the way of antecedents, and begins to define a new way of thinking about social problems, economics and the connection between them. In Bellers a talent for systematic assessment and analytic thinking are combined and applied to social and economic realities in a new way. Remember, this is in the latter part of the 1600’s, nearly hundred years before Adam Smith and others of that time began to figure out the contours of political economy in a systematic way.

Where did this new angle of vision come from? It is clear in his writings that the root of his inspiration and the understandings that govern his thinking derive from a Quaker worldview. He would not have thought like he did had he been raised an Anglican. He certainly would not have looked at the plight of the poor in the way he did had he been raised a Calvinist. I think the evidence internal to his writings, to his analysis and proposals, establish the Quaker element as key to both his visionary conceptions and his practical proposals.

I have, in all this, no dramatic discoveries or startling insights, but rather, I hope, a steady accumulation of evidence, a kind of intellectual and spiritual narrative that will build into a strong sense of the evolutionary potential and contribution of Quakerism as exemplified in the work of John Bellers.

Part Two

The labours of the poor, are the mines of the rich.

John Bellers

John Bellers: “A Phenomenon in the History of Political Economy”

In order to lay out the panorama of John Bellers’ contribution to the evolutionary potential of Quakerism, I will first list his twenty publications with brief comment to provide a good sense of both his analytic range and his practical proposals. I will then expand a bit on three of his most important projects.

The best way to begin is to give you the full title page of his first published work: *Proposal for Raising a Colledge of Industry of All Useful Trades and Husbandry, with Profit for the Rich, A Plentiful Living for the Poor, A Good Education for Youth. Which will be Advantage to the Government, by Increase of the People, and their Riches.* At the bottom of the page is printed; “Motto, Industry Brings Plenty”, followed by “The Sluggard shall be cloathed with Raggs. He that will not Work, shall not Eat.”

Bellers first published this pamphlet in 1695. He immediately revised it, adding more statistics to his analysis, and answering the objections of his critics. This new edition, published in 1696, carried the signed endorsement of 42 prominent Quakers including William Penn, Robert Barclay, Thomas Ellwood, and Leonard Fell. This *Proposal* became his signature work. He circulated it to Friends, to the Members of Parliament, to the Archbishop, Bishops, and Clergy of the Church of England, to the rich industrialists of the day and to wealthy landowners. He was not looking for charity. He was looking for investment. This proposal was strictly for a business enterprise.

In essence, Bellers’ proposal for a “Colledge of Industry” described a cooperative community set up to provide basic education, vocational training, and livelihood production of goods and services. In our terms, it was closer to the concept of a “new town” than to an “intentional community.” Although Bellers advanced the concept as an institution through which those in poverty could work themselves out of this condition, he calculated the investment return to funders in a way that would be attractive to those with surplus wealth. He further calculated that the educational, training, and healthcare benefits would also be attractive to families of good means, thus creating a mix of participants that would help stabilize the projects and develop them as clusters of economically viable and social progressive activity in many districts.

At the same time he published a letter entitled, *To the Children of Light, in Scorn called Quakers.* Many Friends by this time were doing well in business and were accumulating surplus wealth. The letter explained why investing in the establishment of a “Colledge of Industry,” according to his *Proposal*, would be both fiscally prudent and morally excellent. He also addressed himself, on behalf of his *Proposal*, to the Government in a document titled, *To the Lords & Commons In Parliament Assembled.* In this he argued for the welfare of the entire nation, saying that support for one example of a “Colledge of Industry” that was successful could spark a movement of duplication that would have a profound uplift effect on not only the poor but on the whole society.

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

In 1697 he published *An Epistle to Friends concerning the Education of Children* which linked the by now well established concern among Quakers for education with the education component of his *Proposal*.

In 1699 Bellers published a major integration of his economic and religious perspective. Again, the full title will provided the scope. It is called: *Essays About the Poor, Manufactures, Trade, Plantations, & Immorality, and of the Excellency and Divinity of Inward Light, Demonstrated from the Attributes of God, and the Nature of Mans Soul, as well as from the Testimony of the Holy Scriptures*. This publication is addressed specifically “To the Lords and Commons in Parliament Assembled,” with a subsidiary address “To the Intelligent and Thinking Reader.” This latter address begins with the following sharp but tempered comment.

Witty Men, who think but once upon a Subject, are able to make a Jest upon it; but Wise Men think twice, that will give the right judgment upon things: And these last are the Readers I address my self unto, who have the temper to receive a good Proposition, and Sense to disprove a bad or weak one, by Proposing a better: For that Physician that can advise nothing in a desparate Disease but contradicts others, will have no great Cure to boast of.

The richness of this collection of essays cannot easily be conveyed. Extensive quotation and comment would be required and I cannot do that here. Suffice it to say that in my copy of Bellers’ writings I have marked more passages in this text than in any other. Mainly it provides historical, anthropological, behavioural, ethical, theological, and experiential evidence for the worldview from which he works. The text is only twenty-two pages in Clarke’s edition, but it dwarfs in the power of its conception and execution many of the lengthy and ponderous works of political economy that were to appear within the next Century. Here is just one sample of Bellers surgical like analysis:

It is a certain Demonstration of the Illness of the Method the People are employed in, if they cannot live by it: nothing being more plain, than that Men in proper Labour and Employment are capable of Earning more than a Living; or else Mankind had been extinguished in the first Age of the World;

This publication includes two of his most often noted pieces of social and economic analysis: “Of Money” and “Some Reasons against putting of Fellons to Death.” The short piece on money is utterly amazing. He fully understands money as a technology of social trust, the labour theory of value, the dynamics and danger of inflation, and that money is only useful when it is “parted with.” He is literally centuries ahead of his time in his understanding of money. Not even Marx quite escaped the mystification of money with as much clarity. Not until Irving Fisher developed his “quantity theory of money” in 1911, and Silvio Gessell introduced the concept of demurrage, do we have a comparable lucidity on the subject. Likewise, his argument against the death penalty is without precedent. He is the first social thinker in history to reason his way to the abolition of this moral and legal custom. And his argument, characteristically, is a seamless blend of social psychology, economics, and moral advancement.

He ends this collection with sections on God, Man’s Soul, Christian Virtue, and the practice of Divine Worship, all cast in a way of thought and expression that clearly illustrates the innovation in understanding that Quakerism was bringing to the times. For example, he writes:

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

And God being the most invisible Light, Spirit, and Life, he penetrates all Beings and Spirits, more thoroughly than the visible Light at Noon-day doth the Air;

In the section on Virtue he highlights the cardinal transition of Quakerism that I earlier discussed. He writes:

Reasons of State, Profit, Health, Reputation, or Danger of Punishment was part of the Motives given by the ancient Philosophers, to persuade Men from Vice; which, as it is the least, it is the first Step towards Wisdom; Learning to do well, through Love to Virtue, being a degree higher, than ceasing to do evil for fear of Sufferings.

In 1702 Bellers published a document that addresses what must have been a persistent problem within the Society of Friends. Although certainly aimed at Friends, it is, characteristically, framed in a way that makes it universally applicable to all who might be concerned with its theme. Again, the full title: *A Caution Against All Perturbations of the Mind; But more particularly against (the Passion of) Anger, As An Enemy to the Soul, By making of it Unfit for The Presence of God, And Unable to Enter The Kingdom of Heaven.*

Quickness to anger and continuing grudges deriving from conflicts must have been a persistent problem. Friends in those days were a diverse lot. Pacifism was not yet a consistent view. Bellers takes up his subject at the root. Here are a few choice lines:

Anger is the parent of Murder ... as an Acorn is of an Oak. Anger is the worst Temper of the Mind, it being the directest opposite to Love, which is the best, because God himself is Love; ... Love is the first Divine Impression the Soul of a Christian receives, and the last he loseth, ... No Man is Angry for God's sake, but it is for our Own Will; which not being Resigned to the Will of God as it should be, is that which gives the first motion to Anger; ... God is a God of Order, and the Glory of those Assemblies, where the Members have a Sense of Him upon their Souls. But it is also true, that any Disorder upon the Minds of Men will deprive their Souls of His Presence, and therefore such Perturbations must be Sin and Evil.

In the last line of this essay, Bellers, in his gentle way, really puts it to the leaders, who, as we know, are often beset with outsize egos. He writes as follows, using a reference for the evil power from the Book of Revelations:

But it's a Melancholy Consideration to think ... that the Dragons Tail should do more Mischief ... among the Stars of the Church, than his violence could do among the least of the Flock of Christ...

The last section of this publication is titled: *Watch unto Prayer: or Considerations for All Who Profess They Believe in the Light, To see whether they walk in the Light, without which they cannot become the Children of It, nor be cleansed from their Sins.* In this essay Bellers holds up the discipline of what he calls “watchfulness” in the same way Buddhist’s hold up the practice of “mindfulness.” Here is the way Bellers begins his essay:

Watching is as needful to the soul as breathing is to the body; every quickening of the soul to God, gives a disposition to watchfulness, as much as the body, recovering out a swoon, is disposed to breath.

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

As breathing whilst living, is inseparable from the body; so watching is inseparable from the soul, whilst it lives towards God.

Watching is to be Spiritually minded, which is life and peace.

Further on in the essay he writes the following:

Therefore he that governs his mind right, is the only sincere man; whereas he that keeps not a watch upon the thoughts of his heart, is much out of his way; for though he should imitate the best of forms, he is but of the outward court; it being impossible to worship God in the beauty of holiness, with an irregular mind.

But he that watches in the Light it will bring him to the New Jerusalem.

Although there is much Quaker literature I have not read, I have never before come across anything quite like this. Its resonance transcends culture. It leaps backwards and forwards over the centuries of spiritual discipline. Confucius would have understood this perfectly. Bhodidarhma would have raised a hand in silent recognition. Thich Nhat Han would smile knowingly. And Mary Oliver, the contemporary poet so loved by Friends, whose work is essentially a call to wakeup and pay attention, would surely salute a spiritual forerunner.

Bellers was primarily a pioneering political economist and a proto social ecologist, but you can see here that his work was founded on a depth of spiritual insight – relationship insight – that the evolving Quaker context was advancing into the society of the time.

In the early 1700's the Protestant population of France's Rhenish Palatinate region had come under severe persecution and were fleeing in great numbers; over 400,000 in a few years. At least 15,000 came to England destitute and seeking refuge. In 1709 John Bellers responded with a publication addressed *To the Lords and other Commissioners, appointed by the Queen to take Care of the Poor Palatines*.

With brevity and clarity he offered again his *Proposal for a Colledge of Industry* as a way of responding to the problem within a business investment framework. He saw this refugee immigrant population not as a burden on the Public Treasury, but as a prime opportunity to advance both human and economic development to the benefit of the folks in question and to the nation as a whole. No one, it seems, had the wit to understand the rationality of his project. The concept of combining investment interest with human uplift for the good of the nation was simple beyond the ken of economic thinking at the time.

In many ways Bellers' understanding of political economy had to wait until the 20th Century to be comprehended and implemented. Even now there are jurisdictions and hold outs of selfish class interest that do want to participate in the reality of the common good, who, in effect, reject the evolutionary potential of human development that Quakerism helped nurture and carry forward to our time.

In 1710 Bellers unloads into the teeth of the endless European wars a publication of stunning prescience. Modestly titled, *Some Reasons For an European State*, Bellers anticipated the League of Nations, the United Nations and the European Union. This work undoubtedly grew from

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

conversations with William Penn who, in 1693, had published *An Essay towards the Present and Future Peace of Europe*.

Bellers publication is a strong logical advance over Penn's in that it introduces a sophisticated economic analysis with statistically backed arguments illustrating that European wars have greatly retarded the development of husbandry, manufacturing, industry and trade. He argues that, in addition to the moral issues around causing so great a loss of life, the Princes and Sovereigns who foment and extend these wars are foregoing the opportunity to advance economic development, increase the wealth of their jurisdictions, and so gain great favour with their subjects. He cautions them to consider the placement of their responsibilities between God and society and how they can best fulfill the good of their people which God has entrusted to them.

As for a way out of these endless wars, some of which can no longer even be attached to a clear rationale, he recommends the creation of a European parliament where conflicts can first come into open discussion, debate and negotiation. He further proposes an agreement among those who come to this understanding that they will combine, with armed force if necessary, against jurisdictions that violate with aggression the peace of the continent. Sound familiar? This is political thinking 250 years before the United Nations and its peacekeeping forces.

He then goes one step further. He goes to the heart of the religious controversies that lie behind many of the conflicts that eventually erupt in persecutions, violence and war. He asks that the leaders of all the various Christian Churches and sectarian movements come together in a great council for the end of the persecutions and violence that have so marred the Faith and diminished the credibility of its witness in recent times. He is a master in this appeal in the gentle use of shame.

He goes still further: He offers a formula, a technique of dialogue that will enable these Christian leaders – and after all they are all Christian – to meet on common ground and advance the zone of understanding, tolerance, and peaceable relations that Europe so badly needs. He tells them simply to focus on what they have in common, what they all share at the heart of their Christian faith, and keep the things on which they disagree off the table, in fact, completely out of the room. Again, sound familiar? In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity. This is the evolutionary potential of Quakerism moving into ecumenism. Ecumenism, based in the approach first articulated by Bellers, is now a great force for good in the world.

We can't say that Bellers proposals had much immediate effect on the wars of Europe, but it is clear as a bell ringing high over the human landscape that he was dead-on about what was required for peace among nations, and especially with respect to religion based conflict. The European Union is now a reality, and though it is struggling, it is perhaps the most remarkable achievement of modern political life. And not only is Christian ecumenism a reality, but inter-faith ecumenism is also flowering.

In 1711 John Bellers followed his ecumenical intuition and published an open letter *To the Archbishop, Bishops and Clergy, of the Province of Canterbury Met in Convocation*. This letter powerfully challenges the Church of England to practice what it preaches. His words are simple and direct permitting no misunderstanding. Among other things, he asks the Church to urge the Queen to hold a Convention of all "religious persuasions in the British dominions", for the purpose of extending understanding and toleration. This is clearly associated with his plea to the Christian

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

leaders in Europe. He probably thought, if they should do it, the British should do it: Set the example.

Elections in England at this time were rife with influence peddling and corruption. Parliamentary government was up and running but there was little sense of fair contest in a democratic way. Class and moneyed interests readily bought members of Parliament. Political parties were all about gaining advantage for their members and supporters. Political debate and decision-making were rarely about the common good or the welfare of the nation. In 1712, in his typical targeted fashion, John Bellers looked at this mess and published a proposal titled, *An Essay Towards the Ease of Elections of Members of Parliament*.

The main points of his proposal are to control excessive liquor sales around voting sites, institute severe fines for taking bribes, and to make the qualification of electors (voters) more certain. Voting was tied to landholding and landholding to payment of the Queen's land tax. Apparently, the only check on fraudulent voting was to swear an oath that you were a landholder. Fraud was thus rampant. Bellers proposed a systematic census of qualified voters, verified by the payment of the Queen's land tax, be recorded in every Parish every three years. Oaths of qualification would be disallowed and voting would be permitted only on the basis of the verified record of qualification. He argued that such an arrangement would greatly reduce the time Parliamentarians spent wrangling among themselves, for reasons of self-interest, over disputed elections, and thus enable them to spend their time and energy more profitably on national concerns of public interest. Again, we see here the application of systems thinking to problem solving. This may seem like common sense to our ears, but it was a new way of thinking in those days.

Also in 1712 Bellers published a document titled; *Some Consideration As an Essay toward Reconciling the Old and New Ministry*. This powerful, but, at the same time, strangely gentle, polemic was aimed foursquare at the political leadership of England. The "old and new ministry" referred the political parties of the day that were locked in perpetual battle for partisan advantage, while the common good and public interest languished in neglect. It is an appeal, yea a command, for Parliamentarians to grow up into some semblance of their potential for leadership and national guidance. It details in theory and by example what it means to be organized and operate in a politically mature way with regard to national well being. It is on par with Machiavelli's *The Prince*, but it is the obverse; it describes how to cooperate and collaborate in order to serve well the whole nation. Nothing, it seems, could discourage John Bellers in his quest for good order, best practice, and social wellbeing.

In 1714 comes another book to stand along side the *Proposal for a Colledge of Industy*. The title states the case; *An Essay Towards the Improvement of Physick. In Twelve Proposals. By which the Lives of many Thousands of the Rich, as well as of the Poor, may be Saved Yearly. With an Essay for Employing the Able Poor; By which the Riches of the Kingdom may be greatly Increased; Humbly Dedicated to the Parliament of Great Britian*.

This is his plan for a national healthcare system, complete with new hospitals, specialty care, research and training institutes, and, above all, with focused attention on the poor. He argues that the National Treasury should fund this national system, and that its cost would be more than compensated for by the increase in national productivity due to a greatly improved health situation, especially among the poor.

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

This is a detailed document of many parts that are, in the end, integrated into an argument of economic logic and social ethics that is astonishingly modern in its conception and reasoning. Indeed, many progressive jurisdictions in the world today have instituted virtually all the parts of Bellers healthcare proposal. For reasons of social deficit, political immaturity, and greed driven economic interests, some jurisdictions, however, are still plagued by the same forces against which Bellers laboured.

Even as Bellers' systems thinking became more complex, his language became increasingly succinct and even, at times, terse. Eminently quotable passages jump off the page tempting me to insert them here. Better, however, that you should seek out his collected writings.¹⁰

In 1718 Bellers published *An Epistle to the Quarterly-Meeting of London and Middlesex* in which he appeals to their interest in the holistic education and development of children and youth. He attaches a restatement of his proposal for a "Colledge of Industry," emphasizing that charity is not enough, and that projects based on sound economics, educational opportunities, and the social uplift of self-provisioning will effect much greater good for both individuals and society. He includes "A Dialogue between a Learned Divine and a Beggar" in which the Beggar proves to have a superior understanding of both the material and spiritual worlds. This sketch employs a technique much like that later used by John Woolman in creating a conversation between a wealthy landowner and a poor labourer.

In 1723 Bellers redrafts his proposal for a "colledge of industry" into a much briefer form and presents it again to Parliament. At the bottom of the now less elaborate title page he has printed the following:

If there were no Labourers, there would be no Lords. And if the Labourers did not raise more Food, and Manufactures than what did subsist themselves, every Gentlemen must be a Labourer, and idle Men must starve.

This statement is yet another version of Winstanley's aphorism, "*The labours of the poor are the mines of the rich.*"

In the same year, he sends essentially the same document to *The Yearly, Quarterly, and Monthly Meetings of Great Britain, and Elsewhere*. By this time his health is rapidly failing. He is trying one last time to reach out as widely as possible, especially among Friends, hoping for initiative and investment to support his long nurtured dream of self-provisioning and wealth producing cooperative communities, where education, vocational training, and useful employment in husbandry, manufacture, and trades would provide the route to a secure and dignified life for many who languished in poverty. What could be more worth doing?

In 1724 Bellers draws up and publishes *An Abstract of George Fox's Advice and Warning To the Magistrates of London in the Year 1657 Concerning the Poor*. It is essentially a warning against the ethic of social triage and a plea for the widest application of human solidarity. This kind of thinking and moral sensibility is here just emerging in modern thought.

In his last year, Bellers also writes and sends out *An Epistle to Friends of the Yearly, Quarterly, and Monthly Meetings; Concerning the Prisoners, and Sick, in the Prisons, and Hospitals of Great Britain*. Attached to this is a separate letter *To the Criminals in Prison*. These short documents, in

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

the form of broadsheets, were “unofficial” and it seems likely to Clarke that Bellers delivered them himself to Friends and to the prisons. Remarkable features in his recommendations to Friends are that they provide training in vocational skills for prisoners, and that prisoners be supplied with regular meals of baked beef. Ever the systems thinker, Bellers knew that improved skills and diet would improve the prisoners’ chances of a better life outcome on release.

I have gone on a long time, but truly I have just skimmed the riches that are found in the mind, heart and writings of John Bellers. He is right, one reading is not enough; but even with just this survey, the evolutionary potential of Quakerism shines from the depths to the surface in the life and work of this spiritually grounded, beautifully rational, and ethically advanced Friend.

The Persistence of the Quaker Ethos and the Perspective of the Long Haul

In the end John Bellers was not successful in convincing Parliament to support any of his proposals. He did not get the investment support he sought to establish even one “Colledge of Industry.” He did get forty-three prominent Friends to endorse his proposal for “raising a Colledge of Industry”, but no practical effect of this support was forthcoming. Yet he persisted. He never stopped promoting and republishing his proposals to which both compassion and reason compelled him to remain faithful.

There is no evidence that Bellers was eccentric or obsessive or strange in any way. He was successful in business and in family life and well placed socially. From our standpoint, we can say he simply saw the reality of relationships in social and economic life in a way so different from the dominant worldview that the significance of his contribution was out of phase with what his compatriots were able to comprehend. His ability to identify the key areas of needed change, and envision the kinds of change that would set up a cascade of beneficial effects, was far in advance of his time.

The significance of John Bellers work needed a longer timeline to come properly into focus. He seemed to understand the potential of his work in this way and gave instructions in his will for how it was to be preserved. He specified for his writings and all associated papers to be reprinted, bound in one volume, and copies distributed “to the Envoy of every Sovereign Prince and State of Europe who shall have such Envoys residing at our British Court for their respective Masters perusal and one to every publick library in London and Westminster and to the two publick libraries of Oxford and Cambridge”, thus assuring longevity and future accessibility.

Unfortunately, his son and the legal executors of Beller’s estate failed to comply with his will, and the reprinting, binding, and distribution never occurred. Although seeming to disappear from notice after his death, some of Beller’s publications were preserved in the officially approved collection of Quaker writings that eventually became the origin of the Library at Friends House, London. All of his known publications, save one, have been discovered and most recently reprinted in George Clarke’s book. Lost, however, are what must have been a considerable volume of correspondence, and the daybooks he most likely had kept.

It is difficult to know whether his writings continued to be read after his death and what effect they might have had. One negative indication is found on the cover page of an original edition of a communication addressed “To the Archbishop, Bishops, and Clergy.” Written across the page with

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

a quill pen are the words; “John Bellers has no following among ye Quakers.” George Clarke comments as follows:

That he was ignored by the outside world is not surprising. His age was more concerned with the achievement of imperialist ambitions and the growth of trade than the human condition. There was infinitely more concern with the defence of private property than the welfare of ordinary people.

With regard to the unresponsiveness of Friends, Clarke writes: *Perhaps, for the religiously minded, he dwelt too heavily upon economic considerations. . . . Truly the prophet is without honour among his own people.*

It was apparently the case, as previously noted, that by the end of 17th Century and into the 18th, Quakers were settling successfully into the world of industry and commerce, and, in some cases accumulating considerable wealth. The thrust of Friends pioneering social critique was being blunted by success and acceptance. John Bellers himself operated in this world, but for some extraordinary reason also transcended it with his vision of ethically based social investment on behalf of those in poverty, along with an economically based rationale for national healthcare, and a political solution for the peaceful and cooperative unification of Europe. Clearly he drew deeply on his Quaker faith and on its evolutionary potential for mapping out such prescient and, ultimately practical social and geopolitical reforms.

The question naturally occurs: Did John Woolman read John Bellers? They clearly share the same moral universe. Woolman would certainly have found Beller’s work congenial and confirming. There are ways of thinking, details of analysis, and even elements of phrasing that are similar. Beller’s last publication appeared when Woolman was four years old. We know from the correspondence of William Logan, William Penn’s right hand man, that Bellers’ publications were brought to Philadelphia.

William Penn was a close friend of Bellers. His signature is on Bellers’ marriage certificate, and in the list of prominent Friends that endorsed his proposal for a “Colledge of Industry.” Penn, like Bellers, had an astute sense of the relationship between true religion and the work for human betterment. Penn’s writings are permeated with this holistic sensibility. Colonial settlements in those days were small scale and close knit by our standards. Libraries were highly valued and widely used. Those who read were often well read. Penn’s books would have been in circulation among Friends as John Woolman came of age. Woolman recorded almost nothing of his reading, but he would certainly have read Penn’s books. It seems very likely he would have encountered the works of John Bellers as well. I can imagine that Woolman’s skill in seeing the larger contours of the political economy of his time and his holistic social ecology may have been well confirmed by reading John Bellers.

We can, in any event, clearly see that vital currents of the Quaker heritage with regard to social ethics are continuous from Bellers to Woolman, and beyond. A short list would include; 1) equality before the Creator, lifting up equity of access to the means of life; 2) universal compassion, lifting up action to end oppression and injustice; 3) the common good, lifting up collaborative decision making and community enhancement; 4) right relationship, lifting up stewardship for the well being of the whole commonwealth of all life.

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

But there is a second coming for the story of Bellers' work and influence. In 1817, Frances Place, a social reformer, discovered among his books and papers, a copy of the 1696 edition of Beller's *Proposal for a Colledge of Industry*. He was so impressed by the contents that he took it to his colleague, Robert Owen, one of the preeminent social reformers of the 19th Century and, essentially, the inventor of the Cooperative Movement. Owen was, at that very time, developing his "Villages of Co-operation."

Owen was so struck by Bellers' *Proposal*, that he had a thousand copies printed and distributed. He saw it as a direct and vital forerunner of his own social and economic views and his projects of reform. He then published a letter in *The Times*, on 25 July 1817, in which, as Clarke notes, he disclaimed personal credit for the principles on which his own Villages of Co-operation were founded. He wrote as follows:

None, I believe, not one, of the principles [he means his own principles] has the least claim to originality: they have been repeatedly advocated and recommended by superior minds, from the earliest periods of history. I have no claim even to priority in regard to the combination of these principles in theory; this belongs, as far as I know, to John Bellers, who published them, and most ably recommended them to be adopted in practice in the year 1696. Without any aid from actual experience, he has distinctly shown how they might be applied to the improvement of society, according to the facts known to exist; thus evincing that his mind had the power to contemplate a point 120 years beyond his contemporaries. . . . Whatever merit can be due to an individual for the original discovery of a plan, that, in its consequences is calculated to affect some substantial and permanent benefit to Mankind than any yet perhaps contemplated by the human mind, it all belongs to John Bellers.

There could hardly be a more ringing endorsement for the evolutionary potential of Quakerism. I think it likely that if Owen's accolade could be put to Bellers, he, too, would defer credit and tell us that his analysis and proposals just logically flowed from the moral vision that had developed within Quakerism as the result of its openness to learning and the social ethic of human betterment. Well, perhaps; but in addition, I think we can add that Bellers had, in particular, a cast of mind moving toward what we now call "systems thinking"; and that this approach to social and economic reality, while informed by the Quaker ethos, also helped reform it in a new and evolutionarily significant way.

Robert Owen was influenced not just by John Bellers but by association with Quakers of his time. The Cooperative Movement, for which Owen's work was a catalyst, has become a major and worldwide form of social and economic reality, and, in fact, a way of life in its higher reaches of development. Many Quakers have been drawn into or have grown up in the Cooperative Movement. The affinity has long been evident although many Friends may not have known about the Quaker roots of the thinking behind the Movement.

While Owen's attempts to establish Villages of Cooperation was not sustained, his influence was on going. The now worldwide Cooperative and Credit Union Movements stem from this tradition. Karl Marx discovered Bellers while studying Owen and describes Bellers in *Capital* in 1867 as "A veritable phenomenon in the history of Political Economy." In the 1880's Henry Meyer Hyndman, a London stockbroker read Marx and, through him, Bellers. He commented that Bellers displayed "a marvelous faculty for forecasting the future", and that "In his works will be found some of the most luminous thoughts on political economy ever met on paper." "Hyndman's books were widely read

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

by social critics and activists at all levels”, according to Clarke. Hyndman went on to play a major role in the founding of The Social Democratic Federation, a forerunner of the Labour Party.

In 1885, Joseph W. Corfield, a follower of Owen, a Christian Socialist, and a wealthy man erected at his own expense in Kensal Green, London, an obelisk known as “Reformers’ Memorial.” The first name engraved on the monument is Robert Owen. The second is John Bellers. Seventy-two other names follow. In 1898 German scholar, Eduard Bernstein, published *Cromwell and Communsim*, a major study of 17th Century revolution and reform in England. He devoted an entire chapter to John Bellers and it remains a primary reference. Finally, in 1919, with the publication of William Braithwaite’s *Second Period of Quakerism*, Quaker scholarship began to give Bellers his due. In 1935, A.Ruth Fry published, *John Bellers: Quaker, Economist, and Social Reformer*, which collected his major writings, along with a biographical essay. And finally, in 1987 George Clarke edited and published a complete collection of Bellers work, along with an extended introduction, notes and commentary on the documents.

Clarity and Staying Power

As I come to the end of my story, I have to think of how every one of John Bellers’ remarkable proposals has, to one degree or another, in various jurisdictions, been recognized and implemented as sound and effective social, economic, or political policy. And all this by people who never heard his name and, in most cases, know little if anything about Quakerism. Now we might say all this would have happened anyway even if Bellers had never put pen to paper or Friends had not carried forward their passion for justice and fairness in social and economic life.

I think that claim is highly dubious. Certainly social change of various sorts would have occurred as the Western World evolved into modernity, and progressive reforms of various kinds would have been put in place. But if the “Quaker mutation” had not occurred in the “Christian phylum,” as Kenneth Boulding describes it, there are specific characteristics of spirituality, discernment, decision making, learning, moral vision, ethical practice, and cultural amplitude that would not have had the channel of development and transmission throughout the larger society that Quakerism has provided, and are now widely taken for granted as best practice. Those practices, those ways of thinking, feeling, and acting did not come from nowhere. Nor did they come from the hierarchical, dominator ethos that is the mainstream psychic structure of Western Civilization.

Most everything we count as genuinely liberatory, as equity building, compassion nurturing, and community enhancing has been at cross-grain to the hierarchal, dominator template of our culture. There is a long underground tradition of human struggle against oppression and for social equity that has emerged in various ways in various times. It emerged with a particular singularity of consciousness in Gerard Winstanley. It was absorbed and reconfigured in the Quaker movement, and, although muted in the Quietist period, has never gone underground again. The movement is now worldwide and growing in many forms. Paul Hawken calls it “the blessed unrest.”

I do not want to over-claim the significance of Quakerism in the unfolding of this trajectory. But in tracing out the Quaker contribution to social equity and the common good, and, in particular, by bringing John Bellers into the picture, we can see that the evolutionary potential of Quakerism for advancing human betterment has a kind of clarity and staying power.

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

John Bellers observed and analyzed the relationships of power and the uses of wealth that, in his time, were already beginning to build toward the full flowering of a capitalist economy and market society. He could clearly see the human cost that was already the result of its early stages. We might, from our vantage point, say that Bellers was naïve to think that either business interests or the institutions of government would be receptive to his proposals for cooperative enterprises aimed at increasing the economic and social uplift of the poor, or his proposals for education and healthcare aimed at advancing the economic and social wellbeing of the entire nation.

He saw nothing of these reforms in his lifetime. *He was disappointed, but he was not wrong.* As noted, his proposals have been subsequently implemented in many ways, and his faith in the power of spiritual insight and rational thinking was not misplaced. Circumstances of human betterment have accumulated over the long haul, even though severe recurring regressions have accompanied the unfolding of capital driven economies and market dominated societies.

We have now come to a time when another era of economic and social regression is ramping up. Wealth and privilege are clamping down on access to resources. Human betterment gains of the recent past are not secure. Some have already been lost. And now, in addition to the social and economic distress of society, we are facing the ecological distress of disrupted and damaged ecosystems.

Serious economic, environmental, and social problems are undermining our society. Our political, economic, and financial systems fail to provide equitable access to the means of life for all people or to sustain the long-term health of Earth's life support systems. The same political and economic systems that institutionalize inequity also institutionalize ecological destruction by insisting on unlimited and inequitable economic growth on a finite Earth. As John Bellers said, "The labours of the poor, are the mines of the rich." To which we can add, "The dismantling of Earth's ecosystems is the accumulation of human wealth." And, as Kenneth Boulding said, "This is no way to run a spaceship."¹¹

The evolutionary potential of Quakerism must now combine social fairness, ecological integrity, and a sustainable economy into a single focus of wellbeing for human communities and Earth's whole commonwealth life. There is a clarity and staying power in the Quaker heritage that we can bring to this task. This clarity and staying power, as exemplified in the life and work of John Bellers, keeps me going in my darkest moments, and I hope that by telling his story it will do something of the same for you.

Faith is not believing without proof, but trust without reservation.

William Sloane Coffin

Endnotes

1. The meme concept was introduced by Richard Dawkins in his book, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford UP, 1976. Susan Blackmore developed the concept further in her book, *The Meme Machine*, Oxford UP, 2000. A particularly interesting application of the meme concept is found in the book, *Re-Imagining Change: How to Use Story-Based Strategy to Win Campaigns, Build Movements, and Change the World*, by Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning, Berkeley CA, PM Press, 2010.
2. Boulding, Kenneth, *The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism*, Wallingford, PA., Pendle Hill Publications, 1964
3. Boulding, Kenneth, “Earth as a Space Ship” Presentation to the Washington State University, Committee Space Sciences. Access at:
www.colorado.edu/econ/Kenneth.Boulding/spaceship-earth.html
Boulding, Kenneth, “The Economics of Spaceship Earth,” in *Environmental Quality in a Growing Economy*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 1966. Access at:
www.panarchy.org/boulding/spaceship.1966.html
4. Fox, George, *The Journal*, London, Penguin Classics, 1998. Various other editions.
5. Hill, Christopher, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*, London, Penguin, 1991
6. Boulton, David, *Gerrard Winstanley and the Republic of Heaven*, Dent, Cumbria, UK, Dales Historical Monographs, 1999
7. Boulton, *ibid*
8. Clarke, George, editor, *John Bellers: His Life, Times and Writings*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987. See also A. Ruth Fry, *John Bellers 1654 – 1725: Quaker, Economist and Social Reformer: His Writings Reprinted with a Memoir*, London, Cassell & Company, 1935
9. Boulton, *op.cit.*
10. Clarke, *op.sit.*. Clarke’s book is out of print, but used copies are available from online booksellers. Any good university library should have it or be able to get it through inter-library loan. In addition, Bellers’ publications are available on line at university libraries that have access to primary historical documents systems such as Quest.
11. Boulding, “Earth as a Spaceship” *op.sit.*

Addenda

Extracts from *The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism*

By Kenneth Boulding

James Backhouse Lecture 1964, Australia Yearly Meeting

Published by Pendle Hill Pamphlets, Walingford PA, 1964

The scientific history of the Universe can largely be written in terms of three great concepts – equilibrium, entropy, and evolution. Without equilibrium nothing could exist at all and everything would dissolve into chaos. ... Entropy ... in a loose sense may be equated with ... the amount of [a] system's potential for change which has been used up. ... Similarly a nation or a religious society has its origins in some creation of social potential. As its history unfurls this potential is used up and unless it can be renewed the organization likewise matures, ages and dies.

There is however another process at work in the universe which is creative rather than destructive, ... which makes for diversity rather than uniformity and complexity of structure rather than for the simplicity of chaos. ... This of course is the process to which we give the name of evolution. It operates as far as we know through a very simple machinery. Any given system and any given state of the world will be subject to random shocks and random changes. ... The process by which systems change is called *mutation*. The process by which some survive and some do not is called *selection*. It is the combination of mutation and selection which gives rise to the evolutionary process and which permits the realization of evolutionary potential. ... The evolutionary process itself mutates. It has changed several times in the history of the universe, each time as it were, stepping into a higher gear and increasing the rate of evolutionary change. ... Once life was established the rate of evolution increased enormously, for life itself in its genetic structure had an apparatus for recreating potential in each generation and for enormously increasing the rate of possible mutation. ... There is no doubt however that the advent of man, a mere half million years ago, represents a break and a change of gear in the evolutionary process at least equivalent to the invention of life itself.

Even in the history of man there have been at least three mutations in his own evolutionary process. For the first half million years he seems to have developed at a pace which makes a snail look like a rocket. Then, a mere ten thousand years ago, comes the Neolithic revolution with the invention of agriculture. Five thousand years ago comes the urban revolution with the invention of cities and writing. We are now in the middle of the third great transition, greater even than the other two, which is the scientific revolution. To what end it is carrying us no one can say. What is clear is that we are in the middle of an enormous change. In many respects the world has changed more since the date of my birth than it did in the half million years which preceded it. To dramatize this change I say what is happening today is that civilization is passing away and a new state of man is arising which I call "post-civilized."

What I have given in very rough outline is the scientific image of the history of the universe. I now want to step down from the sublime at least to the domestic and to ask what seems an almost presumptuous question, what is the role of the Society of Friends ... in this great process stretching from creation to doomsday? ... Considered as a case of social evolution, the Society of Friends can be seen as a mutation from the Christian phylum. ... Often indeed it seems to be some obscure bud off the main line of evolution which eventually turns out to contain the greatest evolutionary potential. ... These concepts apply very satisfactorily to social evolution, whether this is the evolution of ideas or the forms of organization. Each of the great religions can be seen as phylum stretching through time from its origins, growing or declining and branching with some branches possessing more evolutionary potential than others. Some branches come to an end, and some proliferate into the future. Christianity then is seen in a quite literal sense as a "vine" which proceeds out of the life of Christ.

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

It is hard to identify except by hindsight what is the nature of evolutionary potential. ... Who ... would have thought that an intense young man in leather breeches, preaching up and down Cromwell's England would have been the source of a movement in the course of which this lecture would be given in present day Australia, three hundred years and half a world away! ... Let us then take another look at the leather-clad George Fox and his circle to try to understand something of what constituted their evolutionary potential, for by doing so those of us who belong to the cultural and historical phylum which originated from this mutation will understand ourselves better as we comprehend the role, however small, which we play in the great process of the universe. ... All mutations mutate *from* something and have a long history of earlier mutations behind them. A lion never mutates into an eagle or even into a tiger. The Quaker mutation is purely a mutant from the Christian phylum ... It is a mutation furthermore from Western, indeed, English, Protestant, Puritan, Christianity. Some Friends who conceive of Quakerism as embodying a universal and absolutely valid truth may not find this statement attractive, but its historic truth can hardly be denied.

Even though the Quakers were beyond doubt Puritans, Protestants and Christians, the Quaker mutation nevertheless included a surprisingly large change, comprising an unusually large number of elements. The gulf that divides the Quakers from those most like them, who were undoubtedly the Baptists, is much larger than that which divides the Baptists, shall we say, from Congregationalists or Independents. The magnitude of the Quaker mutation alone makes it of an unusual historical interest. It represented a change from existing beliefs and practices in a considerable number of important religious cultural elements. ...

The first of these, and I think myself the most important, although historians differ on this point, is that Quakers were perfectionists. They believed that life without sin could be lived on earth and they set about rather deliberately to organize a society to do this. ... The inward light for George Fox was no pale intellectual illumination, but a consuming holy fire which not only revealed sin but brought you out of it. The peculiar Quaker culture is quite unintelligible unless it is interpreted by this strong perfectionist streak.

A second very important strand in the Quaker mutation might be called "experimentalism". This is the insistence on first-hand experience as the only true source of religion and indeed of perfection. Perfection cannot be achieved by the mere following of an outward rule or by book learning. ... It is a matter of some debate, perhaps largely semantic, as to whether experimentalism in religion implies mysticism. ... I incline to the view that Rufus Jones was mistaken in trying to identify the stream of European mysticism as the source of the Quaker mutation, and that those who argue that Quakerism came out of English Puritanism are much closer to the truth. ... This does not deny that there are strong mystical elements in Quakerism, for any religion which lays stress on experience will find mysticism congenial. ... The object of Quaker meditation [however] is not so much to achieve union with the divine as to receive instruction from the divine, and very practical instruction at that.

Out of these two mutations in motivation, towards perfectionism on one hand and experimentalism on the other, comes a series of great practical mutations: the Meeting for Worship, the related Meeting for Business, and the whole structure and practice of Quaker meeting as a social organization. ... It seems to have been the genius of George Fox himself ... that created the Meeting for Business and organization of the new society into monthly, quarterly and yearly meetings. This gave it an apparatus, as it were, a "body", capable of maintaining itself and of mobilizing the scattered resources of individuals into a common purpose. Without this the Society of Friends would have probably suffered the fate of the "Ranters" or other sects of enthusiasts who sprang into being about the same time, but which ... were unable to create an on going body.

Up until the middle of the nineteenth century the Quaker pattern of life everywhere was sharply differentiated from the pattern of life around it. Today this is no longer true. There is [now] hardly any ... testimony of the Society of Friends which is not practiced by more people outside it than inside it. There are many more pacifists outside the Society of Friends than inside it. Many of the traditional interests of the Society in social reform ... have largely been taken over by others. Even the very worldly corporations these

The Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism Revisited

days are supposed to reach their decisions in their boards of directors by taking the “sense of the meeting.” It is a serious question therefore whether the evolutionary potential of this particular mutation has not been exhausted and whether the Society of Friends, its contribution having been made to the world, should not quietly dissolve itself and pass into history.

I answer this question with a clear and unequivocal “no”, otherwise I would not be doing what I am doing today. I believe the evolutionary potential of the Quaker mutation is very far from exhausted, and indeed, has hardly begun to show its full effects. I believe furthermore that the Society of Friends has a vital role to play in the future development of mankind, small perhaps in quantity but of enormous importance in quality, and that to refuse to take on this role or to run away from the burden which it may imply would be a betrayal of trust and a tragedy not only for the Society of Friends but for mankind as a whole. These are large claims and only the future will be able to judge whether they are true, but I believe a convincing case can be made for them. ...

I think Quakerism is an example of a mutation which is in a sense premature and ahead of its time. The Quaker belongs to a kingdom that is not yet. This is an awkward loyalty to have. But it is an attitude and loyalty which points towards the future. ... I regard both the religious experience, and also the ethical conclusions ... derived from ... the Quaker mutation as having more relevance in the world to which we seem to be moving than the world we are leaving behind. ... I argue ... that it is precisely in religious experience that one finds the evolutionary potential that looks forward to the ultimate future of man. ... This I why I think religion will not pass away as we move from civilized to post-civilized society, but will become immensely strengthened and enriched.

In the second place the ethical positions which are peculiarly characteristic of the Society of Friends seem to me to be more appropriate to the post-civilized world to which we are hopefully moving ... The Society of Friends is deeply committed to love as a major ethical principle, and on building the human identity around universal love which knows no barriers of race, class, country or creed. Quakers therefore are deeply committed to what I elsewhere called the “integrative” system for the organization of society and management of human affairs. ... The development of mankind leads almost inevitably to an increase in the proportion of social activity which is organized through the integrative system. ... Even the growth of the national state ... represents a degree of concern of all for all and of an integrative system covering at least all its own citizens.... We can argue therefore that the ethic of love is the only one on which the world society which technology has made necessary can be built. If it is so then both the successes and the failures of the Society of Friends are of great importance for mankind in pointing the way towards the development of a world society bound together mainly because people care for each other....

I suggest the Society of Friends has a great intellectual task ahead of it, in the translation of its religious and ethical experiences and insights into conscious understanding ... Why however should a religious society have an intellectual task – surely this should be left to the universities. The answer is that the task in question is spiritual as well as intellectual, in the sense that it involves not merely abstract knowledge, but love and community. ... The search today is for a human identity which will permit us to live in peace ... the true world community for which we all long. ... I believe the next major step for the Society of Friends is to catch a vision of this great intellectual task to which it is called. If it can respond to this vision its evolutionary potential may be great indeed.

Prepared for Quaker Studies 2009, Canadian Yearly Meeting

Keith Helmuth
150 Chapel Street
Woodstock NB E7M 1H4