

August 5, 1984

Last Friday, the Wall Street Journal's second lead was a feature article about the Religious Society of Friends.

One might approach a Wall Street Journal treatment of our Religious Society with a certain sense of dread. But reading it disclosed that, even though individual Friends might wish for an altered emphasis here or there, or for the inclusion of a favorite fact which was left out, the article was on the whole fair-minded and accurate. That it did not relentlessly confound the Religious Society of Friends with the American Friends Service Committee was, in my own view, a mark of an uncommon journalistic sophistication.

The article described a Religious Society founded by George Fox, which spread to the New World from England, which was noted for its members spiritual and activist devotion to peace and human rights, and which today is colored, on the one hand, by liberalism and secularism, and, on the other, by the revivalist movement which flourished in the United States in the 19th century. It described a Society the membership of which had persistently declined in number. For example, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, in spite of the tremendous growth of the general population, is now only about half the size it once was. Moreover, this extremely small spiritual Society embraces all shades of the religious spectrum, from agnostic humanism to evangelical Christianity.

Reading this sober account of our religious fellowship brought to mind something which was once said of the contemporary mystic, Simone Weil: "She assaulted the Garden of Gethsemane, and was mangled by its gate." Here was our own Religious Society, founded by people seeking to revive the Christianity known by Christ and his apostles, left in pieces at the garden gate—a series of fragments, each pretending to be whole.

Some of us who are present here this morning had the chance only two or three weeks ago to experience the diversity of our Religious Society at first hand, when we spent a week in the care of California Yearly Meeting, the host for the Triennial session of Friends United Meeting. Instead of being opened with silence, our evening sessions began with a half hour of electronically amplified gospel music presented by well-rehearsed performers and choirs, or, alternatively, by the 500 gathered Friends rising to their feet and joyfully singing songs of praise, as if with one voice, supported by a great organ whose awesome console occupied center stage.

Surely, there is a meaning to all this diversity which presently eludes not only the Wall Street Journal, but also Friends themselves. For in an era where the world is becoming a global village, there is a special significance to a Religious Society which is spacious enough to make room for everyone. It remains only for us to become convinced that each can contribute to the other, so that the present fragmentation and separateness, colored mainly by an amiable forbearance, can be replaced by active sympathy, by the conviction that we each have something precious to be shared.

For example, I emerged from the experience at Friends United Meeting much challenged by the uplifting power of committed singing by a community, and impressed by a faith based on affirmation, rather than on a collection of things not believed in, on a series of spiritual vetoes, so to speak. It was also sobering to sense the power in a body of our co-religionist who shared one faith, rather than existing as a collection of individuals each

inventing his own personal doctrines. It recalled George Fox's admonition that the motion of Truth always inclines those genuinely led by the Spirit towards unity.

At the same time I am aware that we have much to give, particularly with the practice of silence, and with our understanding that there is that of man in every god which is defined by human words.

Let us hope that three or five years from now the Wall Street Journal can write an article about the Religious Society of Friends which will reflect the perception that its diverse elements are like people climbing a mountain from different sides, who, as they rise nearer and nearer to the summit, also become closer and closer to each other.