HOW DO WE KNOW?

A Reflection on Unity-Based Decision Making as Practiced in the Religious Society of Friends and in the American Friends Service Committee

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Academicians, as we know, can generate many theories about history. But one of the most interesting, it seems to me, is that developed by the great historian Arnold Toynbee. Instead of assuming that history is driven by economic forces, or by the dynamics of the survival of the fittest, he saw humankind's various spiritual movements as one of the great driving forces behind historical processes.

His contemplation of the great tapestry of human spirituality, and of the cultures and civilizations which give expression to it, inspired in Toynbee a generous-mindedness. He was inclined to see the world's diverse spiritual traditions as evidence that the activity of God manifests itself in human affairs in ways befitting particular times and circumstances.

At one point he seeks to define the common essence of humankind's religious faiths. He identified the following characteristics, among others: 1) Humankind's spiritual traditions all flow from the experience that the universe is ultimately mysterious; the meaning of the world is not contained simply in itself or in humanity; 2) The meaning of the universe is to be found in an Absolute Reality, or presence, which, although "in" the universe, is not to be exclusively identified with it, and 3) This presence not only expresses a truth of which human beings can be aware, but also a good for which they thirst; people, therefore, seek not only to experience this Reality, but also to live and to act so as to be in harmony with it.

Toynbee's ideas are a useful place to begin this reflection about Quaker decision-making because Friends can, I think, recognize a kinship between their own experience and Toynbee's observations. That is, Friends experience an awareness of

the divine presence, a connectedness to the Creative Principle underlying all things, and simultaneously feel called to a new way of being which manifests itself in service to others. While Quakers have been a part of the Christian Church, they have tended not to follow other Christians in one key respect: they did not locate their connectedness to this Ultimate Reality, and their understanding of how to act to express its goodness, in either Scripture or in an ecclesiastical hierarchy. Rather, they located this connectedness in their own, direct, corporate experience.

It is sometimes thought that Quakerism is an individualistic religion. Actually Quakers invented a kind of corporate mysticism through which truth is revealed to the community in a shared search for unity under the Guidance of the Holy Spirit. Quakers practice a highly disciplined procedure of governance and discernment through which the prophetic function operates collectively.

Friends refer to this as Gospel Order. A key understanding of this Gospel Order is that individual inspiration should be tested against the leadings of the group. From its earliest days, the Society of Friends has affirmed the importance of all individual leadings being confirmed by the group, and has tended to believe that the Spirit's voice as heard in a gathered community is, in general, more reliable than the Spirit's voice manifested in an individual only.

Most people have heard that in conducting business Friends do not take votes. Decisions are made through the agreement of everyone. Thus, one of the central characteristics of the discernment process is the custom of reaching all decision in "unity." If differences of view arise, as is likely to be the case in any body of people, consideration of the question at issue ought to proceed in a way relieved of long periods of "solemn hush and mediation," until slowly the lines of thought draw together toward a point of unity.

Essential to the Quaker understanding of unity-based decision-making is the

idea that "there is that of God in everyone." When a group comes together out of each member's sincere desire to find the best way to serve God in the here and now, each expects to find some manifestation of God in everyone else's remarks. In other words, since it is the same Spirit that speaks in every heart, members expect to end their meetings united. In practice, this is a strenuous discipline requiring much patience. In the history of the Society of Friends some key problems have been labored over for as long as a century before unity was found!

In this practice, the dogmatic person who speaks with an air of finality, or who assumes the tone of a debater determined to win, is a serious hindrance. Eloquence which appeals to the emotions is regarded by most Friends as out of place. Those who come to meetings not so much to discover Truth as to win acceptance for their opinions retard the process.

An early Friend, Edward Burrough, writing in 1662, described the deliberations of London Business Meeting, which had been first organized seven years earlier. He observed that Friends do things "not in the way of the world, as a worldly assembly of (people), by hot contests, by seeking to outspeak and overreach one another in discourse, as if it were controversy between party and party of (persons), or two sides striving violently for dominion in the way of carrying on some worldly interests for self-advantage; not deciding affairs by the greater vote, or the number of (people), as in the world, who have not the wisdom and power of God." The Quaker approach is just the opposite, as Burrough continued in his observations: ". . .(I)n the wisdom, love and fellowship of God, in gravity, patience, meekness, in unity and concord, . . . and in the holy Spirit of Truth, . . . in love, coolness, . . . as only one party . . . to determine of things by a general and mutual accord, in assenting together as one (person) in the Spirit of Truth and Equality, and by the authority thereof." (Words in parentheses were originally "man" or "men".)

Roughly speaking, George Fox, often thought of as the founder of Quakerism,

was a contemporary of John Locke, the great English philosopher of the Enlightenment, whose ideas deeply influenced the American Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, both drafted about a century later. It is sometimes tempting to identify Quaker practice with secular democratic theory because there are certain resemblances between the two. But the distinctions between them should be kept clearly in view. These distinctions involve more than a refusal to vote or to define a majority or a minority. Often a democratic decision-making process involves a kind of brokering of viewpoints, a kind of seeking after a fair compromise in which the interests of diverse parties, interests often seen as "self-interest," are maximized at minimal cost to everyone else. While this may be a reasonable approach for a society's political life, it is quite different from a Quaker process, where self-interest, for example, is presumed to have no place. Quaker decision-making is an exercise in obedience, in the denial of self-will, in the seeking of a truth which might be quite distinct from one's own personal or group interest.

Howard Brinton, former Director of Pendle Hill, writes that, at its best, Quaker decision-making does not result in compromise. A compromise is not likely to satisfy anyone completely. The objective of the Quaker method is to discover a truth which will satisfy everyone more fully than did any position previously held. Each and all can then say, "That is what I really wanted, but I did not realize it."

Isaac Penington wrote beautifully of the virtues he regarded as essential for participation in a Quaker discernment process. "First is the pure fear of the Lord. This poises and guards the mind, keeping down fleshly confidence and conceitedness, making it wary and considerate, either of what it receives or rejects; of what it practices or forbears practicing. This causes it to wait much, try much, and consult much with the Lord, and with his ministers and people, and preserves out of suddenness and inconsiderateness of spirit. For truth is weighty, and will bear trial; and the more it is tried in the balance, the more manifest its nature and ways appear."

". . . a third great help . . . is sobriety of judgment. Not to value or to set up my own judgment, or that which I account the judgment of life in me, over the judgment of others, or that which is indeed life in others. For the Lord has appeared to others as well as to me . . . there are others who are in the growth of his Truth, and in the purity and dominion of his life, far beyond me."

"The last is tenderness, meekness, coolness, and stillness of Spirit. These are of a uniting, preserving nature."

One of the things which should always be kept in mind as we face troublesome disagreements is that our corporate seeking for a way forward is not merely a search for a strategy of ecclesial politics through which some people's personal preferences can be made to prevail over other people's personal preferences. Rather, when any spiritual question arises, we are seeking both individually and corporately to attune ourselves to a universal order and a universal good.

The great flaw of traditional religion is to assume that this universal good or universal order is a static thing and that the faith which derives from it has already been fully revealed for all time. It is due to this misconception that so many mainstream religious institutions seem periodically to become oppressively outdated and hollow. For Friends, our devotion to our faith is not akin to clinging to a shrine, but is more like an endless pilgrimage of the heart. For the universal good we hope to align ourselves with, or attune ourselves to, is a movement. Dante speaks of the love which *moves* the universe. There is, indeed, motion; but it is orderly motion; it is not chaotic or random. In other words, this motion is like a dance. The great breakthrough that Quakerism represents is that, with its special attitude toward Scripture and ecclesial authority, with its emphasis on living spiritual experience, it is prepared to respond to this motion of the cosmic dance. We are not a spiritual fellowship which values rigidity.

But this forward movement, this reform from within, is not necessarily an easy thing. Not every change, not every evidence of flexibility, is necessarily a step towards Truth. There is definitely pain and difficulty involved in the effort to discern whether a proposed new step is good or bad. We should not be surprised at this difficulty, for it was never promised to us that we would have a magic way forward. The challenge of the community's distinguishing a true leading from a false one is not without stress, and patience is required as we struggle for unity. One of the unambiguous messages of Scripture is that God frequently speaks to us in the midst of our turmoils, stresses and troubles. So we must never despair of the possibility of receiving a message.

Not unexpectedly, those who are going to dance to a universal harmony will have to listen. The inner silence we practice in Quakerism has the quality of listening. This listening in order to take the next correct step which fits the universal harmony to which we hope to dance, the next step consistent with that orderliness which expresses the love which moves the universe, should have the flavor of obedience, not of contention or of triumphalism, about it. It is conceivable to me that our spiritual life might be gravely injured by taking a step which is technically correct but which nevertheless is taken in a spirit which is out of harmony with the quality of loving obedience which characterizes all authentic leadings. I am not saying that a meeting cannot move forward, that it must be held hostage, until every last person agrees with something. But we must be mindful that our actions ought to be acts of obedience, not a grasping after forms and symbols which placate merely human cravings for satisfaction.

Here in the AFSC we appoint a staff which carries out a diverse program. Together with committee members this staff becomes involved in the affairs of the community in ways which often have profound and far-reaching effects on people's lives. Our committee structure and unity based decision-making practice is our adaptation of the Friends' principle that an individual's leadings to action, whether

he or she be a staff member or a committee member, should be tested in the context of a corporate search for Truth.

All this is not meant to imply that we need to feel guilty if every minute of every AFSC committee meeting does not take place in an atmosphere of profound religious depth. Perhaps it is only once or twice a year that topics arise of such import that they merit the high seriousness of a deeply religious level of reflection. There might be something incongruous about an overly solemn consideration of whether to hold a conference in March or in April. This does not mean that even in small things there is not Truth to be expressed. It only suggests that a certain oscillation in the tone of our deliberations is understandable and natural.

In summary, there are eight main principles which govern Quaker decision-making and AFSC committee practice:

1. **Unity in decision-making**. No votes are taken and no majority or minority positions or groups are defined.

2. **The practice of silence**. There are silent periods at the start and at the end of meetings, and during them if conflict should arise. Every effort is made not to interrupt people, unless the Clerk decides that an individual is using up more than a fair share of the time available expressing his or her views. Under the best of circumstances there are short pauses between spoken contributions to the deliberations.

3. **Willingness to wait**. When agreement cannot be reached, business is laid over until the next meeting.

4. **Full and free participation**. It is assumed that any member may contribute ideas on a given subject, with the understanding that having

stated one's insights once, one's responsibility is ended and the locus of responsibility moves to the group. Participants should be very wary of reiterating ideas which they themselves or others have already stated. Howard Brinton suggests that when one finds oneself tempted to state something a second time, one should seriously examine whether the impulse comes from God or from human frailty.

5. **Willingness to listen**. Participants avoid going to meetings with their minds made up. All cultivate an aptitude for creative listening. Opinions should always be expressed humbly and tentatively in the realization that no one person sees the whole Truth, and that the whole meeting can see more of Truth than can any part of it. Tentativeness and an artless willingness to face the weaknesses in one's own position rather than to paper them over with distracting allusions are outstanding qualities in the best participants in Quaker process.

6. **Informal leadership**. The clerk of the meeting helps to steer the discussion but does not dominate it. The main function of the clerk is to serve the group by helping it find its own "sense of the meeting." Nevertheless, leadership does have a role. Although in Quaker practice it is presumed that everyone has the right to speak, and indeed is encouraged to do so, unlike the one person/one vote system, where in the final analysis the views of the wise and the unwise receive equal treatment, the Quaker process is designed to allow the group to develop a response which blends and optimizes the available wisdom and spiritual strength in the company. Characteristically, in Quaker process, the views of some are recognized as bearing more "weight" than those of others.

7. **A focus on facts**. The effort in the conduct of deliberations is to

focus precisely on facts and on direct experience. In the best practice, emotionalism is kept to a minimum. Friends do not regard it as wrong to have deep feelings; they do believe that emotions should be recognized as such and dealt with thoughtfully. In judging the role of emotions, Friends tend to regard infrequency as a handy measure of depth. There tends to be reservations about a person who speaks with a high level of emotion all the time. We are not urged to stifle our feelings, but to channel them in constructive ways, and never to use emotions as a way of manipulating others in the group.

8. **Intimacy of scale and continuity**. Howard Brinton observes that the Quaker method works better in small than in large groups. It is easier to achieve unity in an intimate group, the members of which are well-acquainted with one another, than in a large group where people come and go with frequency. AFSCers tend to find that the search for unity is difficult whenever participants cannot meet face-to-face. We do resort to telephone conference calls and to correspondence when issues are not really too difficult. But, basically, there tends to be a feeling that you must look people in the eye in order to be sensitive to them. In the life of the Religious Society of Friends, meetings tend to divide whenever they get too large, and Howard Brinton recognizes this tendency as a good thing. In an AFSC Regional Office, it is important that members of different committees have opportunities for face-to-face contact.

In a recent discussion, the question was raised as to whether or not these Quaker decision-making practices are ones whose appeal is limited to people nurtured in the Anglo-Saxon cultural context in which the practices first arose. Is there something about these arrangements which might be expected to seem alien to people from cultures outside the North Atlantic region? The question was raised

particularly with regard to the emphasis on a low-keyed emotional approach, but it might be applied to other aspects of these decision-making practices as well. Are these procedures, and the attitudes of mind and heart among practitioners which seem necessary for their success, inevitably peculiar to certain cultural groups?

This is an important question for us to consider, especially since the AFSC vigorously seeks to involve people of many different cultural backgrounds in its life and work. Obviously, we will succeed in doing this only if the governance practices of the AFSC have a universal appeal and applicability.

It would also seem important to recognize that the Quakerism and its decision-making practice which I have been describing in these remarks is not by any means a routine expression of European culture. The approaches which Friends adopted were deemed such a radical departure from accepted practices and beliefs that Quakers were severely persecuted. It is estimated that during the period of 1647 to 1660, when the movement was first beginning, over 3,000 Friends suffered imprisonment, and also suffered being put in stocks, being whipped, having their property confiscated, and other abuses, and over 30 died as a result of the persecution they suffered, although none had committed what was then defined as a capital offense. Later, when the American Revolution established a democracy in North America, and when the Glorious Revolution, and the ascent to the throne of William and Mary, firmly established a constitutional monarchy in England, decision-making practices in these countries drew somewhat closer to the model accepted by Friends in the beginning. But, as has been noted above, substantial differences remained and still remain. A deliberation in Parliament and another a few miles away in London Yearly Meeting, for example, even if the topic were the same and the points of view represented in the group were similar, would be apt to exhibit markedly different characteristics and would probably produce different results. An Oxford Union debate or a New England town meeting both offer stark contrasts to Quaker procedure. So any supposition that Quaker process in decision-making is a routine

expression of the norms of North Atlantic cultures is no more true, perhaps, than it would be to say that Quaker attitudes about war and violence, education, or the equality of women and men are.

On the other hand, as we look at cultures outside the North Atlantic region, with respect to some, at least, we can often observe themes which are closely akin to Quaker attitudes.

The *Tao Te Ching* is the basic scripture of the Taoist faith, which for 2,500 years has provided one of the major underlying influences of Chinese thought and culture. Both eastern and western observers have noted certain similarities between its teaching and the Quaker approach:

"Can you step back from your own mind and thus understand all things?" (Stanza 10)

"Express yourself completely
Then keep quiet.
Be like the forces of nature:
When it blows there is only wind;
When it rains there is only rain;
When the clouds pass, the sun shines through.
If you open yourself to the Tao,
You are at one with the Tao
And you can embody it completely." (Stanza 23)

"True words aren't eloquent;
Eloquent words aren't true.
Wise people don't need to prove their point.
People who need to prove their point aren't wise." (Stanza 81)

The Buddhist faith has spread quietly over the centuries until it embraces approximately one-sixth of the human family and spans many cultures. In *The Dhammapada*, one of the basic texts in the Buddhist canon, we can read such passages as the following:

"An unreflecting mind is a poor roof.
Passion, like the rain, floods the house.
But if the roof is strong, there is shelter." (Chapter 1)

"The winner sows hatred
Because the loser suffers.
Let go of winning and losing
And find joy.
There is no fire like passion
No crime like hatred
No sorrow like separation
No sickness like huger
And no joy like the joy of freedom.
Look within.
Be still.
Free from fear and attachment,
Know the sweet joy of the Way." (Chapter 15)

"Let go of anger.
Let go of pride.
When you are bound by nothing
You go beyond sorrow.
Anger is like a chariot careering wildly.
He who curbs his anger is the true charioteer.
Others merely hold the reins.

With gentleness overcome anger.
With generosity overcome meanness.
With truth overcome deceit.
Speak the truth.
Give whatever you can,
Never be angry.
These three steps will lead you
Into the presence of the Gods." (Chapter 17)

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, a basic spiritual text of Indian civilization, we find the following advice:

"Do thy work in the peace of spiritual discipline and, free from selfish desires, be not moved in success or in failure. Spirituality is evenness of mind--a peace that is ever the same." (Chapter 2, Verse 48)

"Freedom from fear, purity of heart, constancy in sacred learning and contemplation, generosity, self-harmony, adoration, study of the Scriptures, austerity, righteousness;
Non-violence, truth, freedom from anger, renunciation, serenity, aversion to fault-finding, sympathy for all beings, peace from greedy cravings, gentleness, modesty, steadiness;
Energy, forgiveness, fortitude, purity, a good will, freedom from pride--these are the treasures of the person who is born for Heaven." (Chapter 16, Verses 1, 2, and 3)

Some time ago, National Educational Television broadcasted a video documentary about decision-making as carried on in an African cultural group named the Mursi, which inhabits an area in southern Ethiopia. The documentary describes how this community reaches decisions about its political destiny in slow and

careful discussions in which anyone who wishes to may speak, where no votes are taken, and where, eventually, a "sense of the meeting" emerges which is summed up by elders whose utterances, over time, have gained respect. While the process, at least as it is described in the documentary film, is not entirely the same as Quaker decision-making (Mursi women, for example, do not participate), there certainly appears to be striking elements of similarity.

Howard Brinton points out that the organic method of arriving at decisions by consensus appears in many pre-industrial societies where self-centeredness has not yet developed. He quotes W.H.R. Rivers regarding the Solomon Islanders: "In the councils of such peoples, there is not voting or other means of taking the opinion of the body." Howard Brinton further mentions that Quakers traveling in America in colonial times sometimes visited Indian councils and remarked at how similar their method of coming to decisions was to that of a Quaker business meeting. One Friend, John Richardson, observed of the Indians that "my spirit was very easy with them . . . I did not feel that power of darkness to oppress me as I had done in many places among the people called Christians." Friends observed that in many Indian councils, women participated as well as men. Thomas Chalkley writes that in traveling beyond the Susquehanna in 1706, he asked permission of the Indians to hold a religious meeting. The Indians called a council "in which they were very grave and spoke one after another without any heat or jarring, and some of the most esteemed of their women did sometimes speak in their councils." An interpreter told Thomas Chalkley that one Indian group had not done anything for many years without the counsel of an ancient, grave women whom Chalkley observed to speak frequently in the meeting.

The main point of this scatteration of examples from different cultures is not to argue that there is a precise congruence between Quaker practice and any particular culture, but only to suggest that Quaker practice is in accord with human nature as it is sometimes manifested in a variety of cultural contexts. There is no

doubt, however, that Quaker practice in decision-making remains at this time (although it may not always be so) a minority practice, a kind of subculture, and those seeking to employ it will do so because they become convinced that it offers something better than the world's business as usual, no matter which of the worlds' cultures their own background is in. This willingness to undertake a different approach is a characteristic as much of those undertaking the Quaker way from a background in North Atlantic cultures as it would be from those approaching it from the other great cultural streams in human experience. At the same time, in the light of Arnold Toynbee's observation, the Quaker approach to decision-making might be seen as an attempt to practice in a concrete way in day-to-day life a great truth, neglected perhaps, but yet common to major spiritualities the world over.

In considering the relationship of AFSC decision-making practice to people of different faiths and different cultural backgrounds, it is useful to practice the Quaker discipline of examining carefully what experience teaches us. We find as we look at the AFSC's past experience that, although it was founded by Quakers, and although its committee structure and decision-making practices are derived from Friends' experiences, it is also true that the spirit of love and truth works through the lives of people from all faiths and backgrounds, and that a remarkable diversity of people can participate creatively in these unity-based decision-making practices. This diverse participation energizes our endeavors and shapes our understanding of the world in which we work. Through our committee structure and decision-making practice, we take it as our common task to upbuild one another as members of one body. We know that if we are peaceful within ourselves, we can bring peace to others. And while we know that the problems we seek to address in the world at large are massive in scale compared with our own physical resources, we also know experientially and experimentally that through the practice of unity and concord which our decision-making structure makes possible, small things can be made very great.