A QUAKER RESPONSE TO AMERICA'S CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE

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We are all aware that there is a crisis of conscience in America. Its major symptom is the breakdown of civil discourse about social ethics in our country. We observe that the most striking feature of contemporary public utterance about moral and spiritual questions impacting upon our common life is that so much of it is used to express disagreements. And the most striking feature of the debates in which these disagreements are expressed is their seemingly interminable character. As debate about ethical and cultural issues becomes more and more shrill, becomes a kind of dialogue of the deaf, different groups seem increasingly to be content with one goal only -- taking power and taking over.

Our democratic society is built upon the expectation that reasonable and fair-minded people, after a period of respectful discussion, will come to a meeting of minds, and having achieved such a meeting of minds, will work together so as to upbuild the social order in a way that gives expression to the democratically arrived at agreement.

Yet in our experience, whether we are talking about the Vietnam War, abortion, euthanasia, a system of health care, gender equality and the relationship between men and women, homosexuality, capital punishment, immigration policy, affirmative action, or prayer in public schools, we see, in contrast to this optimistic expectation upon which our democratic society is built, a pattern of vituperation and contention which seems to have no end in sight. Moreover, many of these issues are such that we can scarcely expect a simple majority vote or decision of the United States Supreme Court to put the matter to rest.

Underlying this polarization there are, I believe, two profound issues or dilemmas, and the subject of our reflection will be to ask if out of our Quaker spiritual experience we can discern a way to carry out a healing ministry in the face of these dilemmas and this crisis.

I would like, then, to proceed first to outline, even if only sketchily, what I consider these two underlying dilemmas to be.

The first underlying dilemma, it seems to me, is that moral and spiritual claims, unlike factual claims, cannot be proven by testable hypotheses. Our rationalistic culture leads us to expect that truth is the product of logical reasoning. When we are dealing with intermediate truths or detailed truths, which rest on more fundamental premises, logical reasoning can indeed be of service, even in the moral and spiritual fields. But the model breaks down when we try to establish the fundamental premises themselves. Logic and rationalism is a way of getting to conclusions from premises; by its very nature logical argument cannot justify the premises upon which it rests. There is no way to justify through logic the ultimate starting point for moral and spiritual reasoning. The rational and enlightened founders of our Republic recognized this when they declared: "We hold these truths to be self-evident. . ." and then proceeded simply to announce the starting point of their thinking.

The reason why we are surrounded by an ethical chaos which has come to be called a "culture war" is that there are so many people who begin their moral reasoning from rival but incommensurable first premises, and we possess no rational way of weighing the claims of one against another.

Consider abortion. Everyone agrees that the government should not intrude into the intimate and personal aspects of our human existence; everyone agrees that life is sacred and that murder is wrong; everyone agrees that each individual

deserves the protection of the community. Indeed these are hallmarks of our civilization. But everyone cannot agree when a human life begins, they cannot agree whether a human fetus is to be included within these definitions and protections or not. Is there any amount of rational democratic discourse which is going to generate agreement about whether or not a human life begins at conception, or whether a fetus remains not a person in the full sense until some later time when it finally becomes a pre-born infant?

So the fist dilemma upon which I want us to reflect together is the dilemma which arises from the failure of reason to solve spiritual and moral questions, and the need to sort out incommensurable first principles. Where does the truth come from? How do we determine the correct unpremised first premises? Does Quaker spiritual practice and experience offer any insights that might be of wider and more general applicability than just to the Religious Society of Friends?

The second dilemma of the modern age which I have in mind is the dilemma of social transformation. Certainly never has the awareness been more widespread that the patterns and structures of societies -- the ways of thinking, the habits of behavior, the institutions -- generate present injustice and portend future disaster. I do not need to enumerate here the well known catalogue of impending catastrophes. Yet in the face of all this, in the face of the widespread consciousness that something is wrong, we seem to lack effective means of social transformation, even in democracies.

In reflecting upon the twentieth century different people have dubbed our era in different ways, depending upon the patterns which they see emerging: the century of total war ; the American age; the Gandhian age; the post-modern world. I wonder if this twentieth century could also be dubbed "the era of failed revolutionary projects." Certainly the latest attempt radically to transform human society, the attempt based upon the theories of Karl Marx, the attempt at social transformation

which was expected to be matched by a transformation of human nature itself, now lies everywhere in ruins. What should be our attitude of mind and heart as one of the most spectacular commitments of thought and labor to the improvement of human life which has ever been attempted, an enterprise that at once challenged us, bewildered us and frightened us, lies mangled before our very eyes?

Although the Socialist revolution is the most spectacular example, one might wonder as well about other manifestations of this phenomenon. Just as the socialist movement was overwhelmed and ultimately ruined and discredited by Bolshevism, many other change movements have tended to be devoured by their extremist wings and have been inclined to dissipate in one form or another of disorder and ineffectiveness. Even before Martin Luther King Jr.'s death, the signs of this were unmistakable in the Civil Rights movement, and we can observe the phenomena as well, I believe, in the youth movement of the 1960's, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and feminist movement of more recent time. Most of these movements brought about significant gains in American society; it is not necessary to denigrate these considerable accomplishments to observe also that a disintegrative dynamic set in well before the desired agenda for change was completed.

I believe the descent of revolutionary projects into self-defeating extremism is not unrelated to the first dilemma, that is, to the collapse of moral discourse, but I hope this relationship will emerge more clearly later. For the moment, though, it is simply appropriate to observe that the question of social change is linked to the matter of failed discourse on moral issues, and to the crisis of conscience in America, in that most of the unresolvable quarrels are about the spiritual, ethical and moral dimension of social change issues -- about abortion, gay liberation, gender equality, medical care delivery. These are all questions about where society is going, or about how it has developed in ways which should be reversed. In any event, the dilemma I wish to pose is this: How do we discover a way of living the Truth, a way of bearing witness, which holds out the hope of authentic social transformation? Does Quaker

spiritual experience and practice offer us anything in the way of guidance about how to be good and successful revolutionaries, or good and successful social change agents?

In a talk given at New York Yearly Meeting in the past, I explored the corporate dimension of this search for truth -- of this search for fundamental premises and for authentic ways to advance social change based upon the fundamental premises -- and tried to advance the idea that a rededication to the disciplines of our business meeting and corporate discernment process holds out a very real hope that Friends could find a way forward through these dilemmas, and at the end of that reflection I affirmed that by Friends doing this they will help not only themselves, but, also society at large. I did not discuss exactly how this healing ministry to society at large would take place, I merely affirmed that it could take place.

I do not want to repeat those thoughts today, since some of you have head them before. Rather, I will discuss Quaker spirituality and spiritual practice on the individual level rather than the corporate level, and try to explain how solid individual practice, how the individual's life of piety -- if I could resort to so old-fashioned an expression -- undergirds the corporate discernment process. I will again affirm, without drawing a detailed picture, that our practice of these virtues as individuals will be a service to the community at large, once again without demonstrating concretely how this is so. There is only so much that one can do in thirty or forty minutes, and so a discussion of how the Religious Society of Friends, by struggling on the individual and corporate level to put its house in order with respect to culture war issues, will serve society as a whole, will have to wait for another time.

There are four traditional virtues which Friends practice as individuals which, I believe, if practiced faithfully, will allow a way forward in the face of these modern

dilemmas. These virtues are: 1) basing our spiritual reflection on concrete experience and everyday practice, 2) the cultivation of a healthy emotional life, 3) careful attention to the work of the mind, and 4) a willingness to be accountable to our spiritual community.

The first thing we must say about Friends' spirituality is that Friends are activists. They see a close relationship between spiritual life and daily affairs. Friends' spirituality is the spirituality of the householder, the citizen, the businessperson, worker, the artisan, the physician and the teacher. In spite of a lapse into quietism during one past era, Friends' spirituality is not primarily about reclusiveness and a self-centered search for inner consolation. This engagement in life provides a rootedness in first-hand observation. Friends try to keep close to experience in pondering spiritual and moral questions. They seek to make acute observations about economic and social conditions based upon this experience, and to avoid vast theorizing which is detached from direct experience. Moreover, Friends, in their activism, try to practice what they preach, and to observe and to learn from the results of this practice. They seek to advance on the spiritual path experientially and experimentally through practice and observation undertaken in the course of engagement in life as it is lived as householders and citizens.

Second, Friends' spirituality involves the cultivation of healthy emotions. There is a vibrant emotional component to a Friend's spiritual make-up. The practice of inner and outer silence is not akin to a retreat into the impersonal bleakness of pure reason, as is sometimes thought. To read Quaker journals written by individuals, or the minutes of yearly or monthly business meetings at times when key decisions are made, is to become aware of a deep level of feeling. Often, Friends' approach to the issues which vex political and social life is rooted in a strong sense of compassion for their fellow creatures, and not some sort of impersonal logic about causes and effects, or about reasoning as to why peace in Bosnia or Rwanda is really in America's self-interest.

It is impossible to imagine an authentic Quaker spirituality which is not characterized by deep feeling and which does not give evidence of a strong emotional component. In fact, one complaint of George Fox and other early Friends about the religious life they saw about them was that people, especially trained preachers and clergy, could talk fluently about theology but seemed not to *feel* Christianity deeply within themselves.

But while Quakers have strongly emphasized the emotional component of religious life, their attitudes about emotions and about human psychology are starkly different than ones which have become common in modern life. One sees little evidence in Quaker writings of what might be called the "thermodynamic" view of human psychology, wherein the psyche is analogized to a steam boiler. According to this popular theory, emotions can build up in the psyche and cause an explosion of some kind if they are not let out. One never reads in a Quaker journal something like the following: " I was very exercised about what my neighbors were saying, and was glad to relieve myself of inner discomfort by giving them a piece of my mind, thereby narrowly averting for myself the calamity of ulcers and neurosis." In fact, quite to the contrary, John Woolman silenced himself for several days once because he felt that something he said lacked sufficient charity.

Especially absent from Quaker experience is the disabling modern idea that we are helplessly determined by emotions over which we have no control, an idea which has all the characteristics of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Friends have clearly regarded some emotions as coming from God, emotions such as love, tenderness, compassion, and humility, while other emotions are seen to arise out of creaturely weakness or out of the delusions of a civilization gone awry. The practice of inner silence, rather than erasing all emotions, as is sometimes thought, liberates the God-inspired emotions from the clutter of worldly impulses which modern life seems intent on inducing. Friends have always regarded the cultivation of healthy and vital emotions as an active responsibility, rather than as something over which we have

no control and for which we are invited to blame others -- our parents, our genes, our employers, our childhood experiences.

Given the vituperative and shrill turn the so called culture war has taken in society at large, Friends' willingness to practice sensitivity to others, compassion, and deep sincerity in the search for truth, and to avoid escalating the anger and indignation now overwhelming the public square, would seem to be an important contribution to the community's spiritual health.

Third, although I have asserted that pure reason and logic cannot lead us to fundamental spiritual Truth, to the first premises, this is not cause to neglect the life of the mind altogether. We must give careful attention to the work of the mind.

Friends have always been careful to cultivate the critical intellect, and have not neglected the life of the mind in favor of some sort of religion based on pure feeling alone. The best Quaker writings about human issues, such as slavery, gender equality, the education of the young, the relationship between European settlers and Native Americans, the issues of war and peace, skillfully merge facts and observations with spiritual ideas and principles. Quaker writers usually take the thoughts and concerns of people who disagree with them quite seriously and try to demonstrate truth by arguing carefully and reasonably from mutually acceptable fundamental premises. Gandhi, although obviously not a Friend, saw this willingness to ponder deeply and to grapple conscientiously with the thoughts of those with whom one is in disagreement as an important spiritual discipline, purifying in effect and essential to the non-violent approach.

The work of the mind has to do, at least in part, with the relationship of the faith community to the wider culture. Let us remember the statement of William Penn: "True godliness does not turn people out of the world but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavors to mend it." In the Quaker view, and indeed

in the view of people of any faith who take religion seriously, spirituality cannot be thought of merely as something that is personal and private. To do so drastically diminishes it and even trivializes it. The notion that we can be related to God and not to the world and to history, either as individuals or as a faith community, that we can practice a spirituality that is not political, is, at least in the Quaker view of things, totally illusory. Let us face it: if our faith is to be relevant, if we are to engage at all in the gradual, painful effort to move the human community towards the City of God in temporal affairs, our faith has to confront the whole spectrum of modern learning, including economics, political science, literary criticism, historical inquiry, philosophical studies, linguistics, natural science, social theory and the arts. To the extent that people of faith are willing to live in their own ghetto, the movement of culture is simply captured and dominated by Marx, Darwin and Freud.

The ultimate irony is that those who neglect the work of the mind wind up, unbeknownst even to themselves, coopted by whatever social trends happen to prevail. It is one of the paradoxes of current history that the anti-intellectualism of the religious right and the anti-intellectualism of the religious left has had the same impact on both these spiritual communities. For without the resources of clear thought which an intellectual tradition and the work of the mind can provide, each of these communities has wound up being absorbed into and coopted by social trends without themselves seeming to realize it. And so on the right we see the strange spectacle of so-called Christian people being coopted by the economic theories of Ronald Reagan, as if his brand of capitalism were expressive of Gospel values, while on the left, spiritual communities are absorbed by attitudes of cynicism about the possibility of knowing truth, by the exaltation of expressive egotism, extravagant self-centeredness and individualism, and even anarchy, in a way which is *also* totally contradictory to Gospel values and certainly to any sort of Quaker authenticity. The dismal state of spiritual communities at the right and the left end of the spectrum is due almost entirely to a neglect of the work of the mind. Both groups are vulnerable to attractive and powerful slogans. Being prejudiced against reasoned

discourse, they are notoriously vulnerable to captivation by the glittering catch phrases and satisfying patterns of imagery which, in the name of relevance or political correctness, slide over the surface of things, mask everything that is true, and hide everything that is authentic. People engaged in the culture of anti-intellectualism inevitably bounce meaninglessly from one facet of a dark and broken world to another.

Let us be clear that when, in a Quaker context, we speak of the work of the mind we are not talking of the sort of arid intellectual debates which tend to lead to polarization and disunity, and in the face of which most sensitive people see true godliness withdrawing. A Quaker Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business is a way for bringing into view all aspects of a given question, but of doing so with a reverence and a tenderness which builds towards convergence rather than disunity.

There is a sense in which intellectual arguments can be said to "compel." A good argument does this not by terrorizing, nor by manipulating the emotions, but only through what we conventionally call the "force" of the argument. Such arguments compel not by steam-rollering, but by eliciting from people responsible and free acts of evaluation, judgement, and decision.

As Friends we know very well that in all responsible human labor, including the labor of the mind, there is a necessary discipline. This discipline imposes upon our patterns of speech, not doubt and hesitation, but a certain kind of reverence and reticence. This is why Quaker dialogue and Quaker search for truth differs in form, pattern, and diction from an academic exercise or a parliamentary debate. Quakers understand that serious and responsible theological speech will be characterized by a kind of courtesy dictated by the awesome mysteries upon which it seeks to reflect. Such argument is inquiring rather than dogmatic, and avoids setting down simplistic formulas as final and inflexible embodiments of Truth.

Mass society and fascism are both examples of what is likely to happen when nations become populated by people incapable of reasoned discourse, the first duty of true citizenship. As people of religion we should always do honor to the work of the mind. For there can at last be no decent politics or community unless there is a body of citizens who are communicative and responsible and disposed to join with others in the reasoned and reasonable consideration of and management of common affairs.

So, the interconnectedness of thinking, feeling and doing in Quaker spiritual practice supports Friends discovery of truth and their efforts to witness to truth in a way that advances social change towards a better world. Indeed, I would argue that in the life of any individual, thinking, feeling and doing should supplement, stimulate and purify each other, forming a kind of check and balance system. Without these checks and balances one is vulnerable to the various disorders which can come to afflict the religious sensibility, especially the disorders of fanaticism and extremism.

Now, the fourth aspect of Quaker experience and practice which undergirds the effort to find truth and to give expression to it in human affairs applies to the first three. It is this: Friends have always realized that healthy spirituality involves an interaction between the *public* and the *private* dimensions of thinking, feeling and acting. Quaker spirituality does not only involve an interaction and a balance of thinking, feeling and acting in some private place within individuals, but also recognizes the importance of the interaction of private thinking, feeling and acting with community insight and with the public realm generally. Although the practice has to some extent broken down in modern times, throughout the more than three hundred years of Quaker history, most Friends would be very wary of a personal belief or feeling or leading or project or action which was not tested by the group, which was not affirmed by elders or by a monthly meeting.

This balance between private states of thinking and feeling and corporate discernment involves not only good procedural order in the present. Friends have always regarded themselves as heirs to a spiritual tradition to which the owed respect. They have turned to Scripture as a way of dialoging with the past, as a way of observing the working out of great issues of human life, as an illumination of eternal themes in human destiny, as an opening to the divine and as a source of inspiration.

Indeed, it is very difficult to imagine an authentic religious experience which is not in some way derived from or extrapolated from an inherited tradition. We may think of George Fox, for example, as a radical or revolutionary who had spiritual openings of a highly individualistic sort. Yet, we can scarcely believe that the idea, "Christ is the light of every person that cometh into the world," expressed by Fox so often and in so many ways, was simply a direct inspiration from the living God to the living Fox, discovered only later on by Fox to have been given by God to the writer of the Gospel of John seventeen centuries before.

One of the great mistakes of modern times is to exalt a purely personal religion of individual feeling and emotion and to set it totally in contrast to thought and organization; to cherish individual states of mind or emotion at the expense of the outer world of structures and arguments, which are perceived as a threat to the purity of the personal. But true religion takes personal integrity and maturity to be the fragile fruit of an interplay between the forces and factors of thinking, feeling and emotion in the private *and* the public realms. Humankind's spiritual health involves a carefully maintained relationship among personal experience, intellectual inquiry, and the good ordering of a movement or an institution. It is true that rational thought and institutionalism can be corrupted by an unfeeling and oppressively unreal rigidity, but a personal devotion or piety unshaped and unconstrained by public dialogue and by the illumination of the critical intellect is no less disastrously corrupted. Unchecked religious feelings or an overheated religious imagination can

play host to a variety of spiritual maladies, including self-indulgence, idolatries of various sorts, meaningless revolt, and fanaticism. The spiritual health of individuals and communities grows out of the continual, costly, practical public quest for an appropriate balance and harmony among all these constituent elements of the spiritual life.

Thus, in Quaker practice, we see received tradition, critical analysis, fact, theory, and personal responsibility all always offered up for clearing by the community of faith. This is a larger asceticism than simply an individual's turning away in a single-minded quest for his or her own inner peace. A narrow-minded mysticism perceives the fragmented character of human existence -- the varied and endless demands made upon time, attention, energy, responsibility and affection by family, friends, work and society, and especially by other Quakers who disagree with us -- to be simply a distraction from or a threat to the development of one's own personal wholeness. However, a larger and wider asceticism recognizes in the discipline of these relationships and these demands the workshop in which personal wholeness, identity and integrity are forged. Quaker spirituality is first and foremost the spirituality of engagement. We must never look to religious experience primarily for balm and satisfaction, for relief, or for some kind of elevated private feeling set loose from institutional or intellectual challenge.

I asked at the outset: Where does Truth come from? How do we determine the unpremised First Premises from which the search for intermediate and practical ways of knowing and acting Truth are derived. If we lack a starting point for our public discourse, if we lack a common concept of the unpremised First Premise, we are left with an awkward and embarrassing reality that the debates which are tearing at our social fabric simply have no conclusion. In so far as God is dead and no longer can supply the answers to the fundamental, can no longer supply the first premises behind the knowledge of good and evil, the situation may portend not only God's funeral, but ours as well. Many people are coming to realize that the idea that

the basic moral choices which face us individually and socially are simply a matter of individual taste is not only untenable, but ultimately calamitous. It is this realization which fuels the often frightening resurgence of fundamentalist and dogmatic religion in our national life.

As Quakers, we are often exasperated, or at least bewildered, to find the entire spectrum of opinions about the difficult crises of conscience which are tearing at public life right here within our own Religious Society of Friends. But I believe that rather than being a curse, this is an opportunity, if we hold faithfully to the traditions of the larger asceticism, the check and balance approach to the spiritual life, which I described earlier. For by practicing our discernment process faithfully we can come to receive the guidance of the Holy Spirit in discerning anew the unpremised first premises. I do believe that there is a Truth which comes from God, and that our Quaker spiritual practice allows hope that, with sufficient patience, it will come to be known, and we will know how to attune ourselves to a Universal Order and a Universal Good.

The flaw of much traditional religion is to assume that our apprehension of this Universal Good or Universal Order is a static thing; that the faith which must sustain us 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. It is a misconception which leads to a kind of spiritual imperialism based on a sense of owning the complete Truth. For Friends, our devotion to Truth is not akin to clinging to a shrine, but is more like an endless pilgrimage of the heart based on our awareness that God's Truth is always somewhat beyond our secure apprehension. Moreover, we understand that the alignment with a Universal Good which we seek is a movement, it is not a static thing. There is a motion, but it is orderly motion; it is not chaotic or random or discontinuous. In other words, this motion towards Truth is like a dance. The great breakthrough that Quakerism represents is that, with its special attitude towards 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. With respect to such matters as same gender relationships, as the broadening of membership in our Religious Society to include people who are not Christians in the traditional sense, and the issue of abortion, we are discovering some of the pain and difficulty of practicing Quaker discernment, of trying to know 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.

But this possibility depends upon faithful adherence to the discipline of the dialogic, check and balance process I described earlier. Before closing I would like to consider John Woolman, as an example. John Woolman, as we know, witnessed against the institution of slavery and against other social evils. But it is a little difficult, from the vantage point of modern life, to visualize the context in which Woolman's witness took place. Woolman was given free board and lodging in the homes of the slaveholding Quakers with whom he was laboring. In other words, the sort of dialogue which Woolman undertook was made possible by the institutional framework of the Religious Society of Friends and by its ability to embrace both Woolman and the slaveholders with whom he had friendly but urgent conversations. Woolman confessed this to be hard labor, but he also allowed that it often led to a deeper experience of closeness and of true gospel fellowship. Could we imagine today

that liberal unprogrammed Friends with a distaste for Christian vocabulary would provide home hospitality to travelling ministers from the Evangelical Quaker tradition who had come to persuade them of their need to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior? Or, to put the shoe on the other foot, would Bible-oriented and Christ-centered Friends welcome into their homes liberal Friends who came to exhort them about gay liberation, or about abortion as a matter of free choice?

In other words, Woolman's great work was certainly made possible by his personal virtues, his patience, his unfailing charity, and the tenderness and compassion into which he was cultivated and which he himself nourished in his own soul, but it was also made possible by the Quaker culture and institutions to which both he and slaveowners faithfully adhered. Woolman's care in clearing his ministry with authorized Friends' bodies was matched by the willingness of Quaker slaveholders to abide by the traditions of the travelling ministry, not only by giving lodging but also undertaking attentive listening and dialogue. This dialogic search for Truth and the traditions of patience and civility which are implied by it have been to a considerable extent lost in modern times. Even our Quaker culture can come to resemble a worldly dynamic of impatience, polarization and intolerance.

Certainly a key task for Pendle Hill, the Quaker Center for Study and Contemplation where I work, is the building up and restoration of this dialogic culture by fostering on our campus the practice of deep listening, together with a manner of speaking which is at once both sensitive and prophetic. Pendle Hill should be a crossroads where our prayer, our devotion and our searching dialogue emulates Woolman's charity, integrity and responsibility. Above all, Pendle Hill must never become a place where secular trends regarding correct or fashionable ideas inhibit true sharing.

Pendle Hill is a place where a way is mediated between the extremes of the overcertainty, dogmatism and absolutism, the diseases of the religious sensibility, on

the one hand, and on the other hand the nihilistic assumption underlying public culture in western societies that there is no Truth, that all values are merely a matter of different individuals' tastes, and that societies can survive in the long run without any common spiritual basis whatsoever.

For there *is* a wisdom which comes from God, created from eternity in the beginning, and remaining until eternity in the end. It is a wisdom which we are told the Creator has poured out on all her works to be with humankind forever as her gift. The scriptures tell us the story of God's discourse with her people and of the people's painful and gradual progress in achieving a more perfect grasp of this eternal gift, a more perfect grasp of the ways of Wisdom.

The Quaker discernment process, undergirded by the conscientious practice of blending individual leading with community discernment, is the key to this. For the unpremised First Premise comes only from God, not from ourselves, and God's Wisdom can be discerned in worshipful, patient, corporate deliberation. We find our way closer to the Truth, closer to authentic living, closer to meaningful social transformation, as a result of searching dialogue. It is in such a continual, patient, practical, public quest for an appropriate balance and harmony among thinking, feeling, and doing that the gift of true Wisdom will emerge, the culture war will be healed, and together we will discern a new way of life worthy of our profoundest enthusiasm.

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