Seeking Our Common Life

A Reflection on Culture, Social Change, and the Church as People of Faith Face the Controversy Over Homosexuality

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"Let us then pursue the things that make for peace and build up the common life."

ROMANS 14:19

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For no one of us lives, and equally no one of us dies, for himself alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. Whether therefore we live or die, we belong to the Lord. This is why Christ died and came to life again, to establish his lordship over the dead and living. You, sir, why do you pass judgement on your brother? And you, sir, why do you hold your brother in contempt? We shall all stand before God's tribunal. For Scripture says, 'As I live, says the Lord, to me every knee shall bow and every tongue shall acknowledge God.' So, you see, each of us will have to answer for himself.

Let us therefore cease judging one another, but rather make this simple judgement: that no obstacle or stumbling-block be placed in a brother's way. I am absolutely convinced, as a Christian, that nothing is impure in itself; only, if a man considers a particular thing impure, then to him it is impure. If your brother is outraged by what you eat, then your conduct is no longer guided by love. Do not by your eating bring disaster to a man for whom Christ died! What is for you a good thing must not become the occasion of slanderous talk; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but justice, peace and joy, inspired by the Holy Spirit. He who thus shows himself a servant of Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

Let us then pursue the things that make for peace and build up the common life. Do not ruin the work of God for the sake of food. Everything is pure in itself, but anything is bad for the man who by his eating causes another to fall. It is a fine thing to abstain from eating meat or drinking wine, or doing anything which causes your brother's downfall. If you have a clear conviction, apply it to yourself in the sight of God. Happy is the man who can make his decision with a clear conscience. But a man who has doubts is guilty if he eats, because his action does not arise from his conviction, and anything which does not arise from conviction is sin.

ROMANS 14:7-23

The Renaissance writer Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, in his ***Oratory on the Dignity of the Human Person***, offers us an interesting variation on the Genesis myth. Pico suggests that as the Creator completed the fashioning of the cosmos there was a divine longing for the companionship of others who would reflect upon the beauty, the intricacy and the majesty of the great work which had been done, others who would share with the Creator the joy of this accomplishment.

The Creator realized that such companions, if they were to share the divine joy in the scope of the universe, could not be members of one of the already created families of beings, for these were already subsumed totally in the cosmic dynamic. The Creator thus began to consider the fashioning of human beings, creatures of undetermined nature, creatures which were eventually placed in the middle of the universe, with the Creator saying to them:

> "Neither an established place, nor any special function have we given to you, and for this reason, that you may have and possess, according to your desires and judgement, whatever place, whatever form, and whatever function you shall desire . . . We have set you at the center of the world, so that from there you may more easily survey whatever is in it. We have made you neither heavenly or earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, so that, freely and honorably your own molder and maker, you may fashion yourself in whatever form you shall prefer . . . To you it is granted to be whatever you will."

Pico's parable is useful for emphasizing the element of malleability in human nature, and the fact of human freedom -- the fact that to some extent human beings do become, according to their own design, something either noble or depraved. The parable does not reach several questions: to what extent is this exercise in self-creation an individual, person-by-person process, and to what extent is it inevitably corporate; how much latitude and how many authentic variations are available in this process of self-creation in a cosmos which appears to be characterized by an extraordinary degree of lawfulness and orderliness, not only in the physical sphere, but also in the spiritual, moral and psychological dimensions of its reality. Is it not true that many choices one might seek to make would bring very dire consequences if they carelessly flouted the inherent lawfulness of the Creation? And would it not seem that the effort at self-realization in which every human being is engaged is inevitably shaped, and to some extent even predetermined, by the culture in which she or he comes to birth?

One of the chief functions of the great religious traditions of humankind has been to draw

people together around answers to these questions. Religions offer a vision of what we are meant to be as human beings, they posit explanations for the meaning of human existence, and they outline ways for us to live which are expressive of such meanings. Religions do this not only for individuals, but they aspire to orient entire cultures, and often succeed in doing so. In fact, it might be argued that all enduring cultures have religion as their basis. In short, religions are comprehensive ways of life and thought which seek to foster a right ordering of human life which maximizes spiritual fulfillment and societal well-being.

The panorama of religions and cultures is obviously a mixed one and presents any observer with a bewildering multiplicity of images, from those that are wise and loving to those that are crude and barbaric. Indeed, the net effect of a survey of religions and cultures admittedly leaves one feeling profoundly ambiguous. Nevertheless, throughout history different religions have to different degrees "provided an effective framework of meaning for millions of adherents, carrying them through the different stages of life, affording consolation in sickness, need, and calamity, and enabling them to celebrate communally their times of health, well-being and creativity. Within the ordered psychic space created by a living faith, as expressed by the institutions and customs of a society, millions of men and women in generation after generation have coped with life's pains and rejoiced in its blessings; and some have gone beyond ego domination into a transforming relation to the eternal."[1]

In the present consideration, I will examine the import of the detachment from its religious roots of contemporary North Atlantic civilization, review the reasons why the rationalist and scientific approach which it was hoped could replace the religious sensibility is inadequate to the religious task, indicate how the controversy over homosexuality in our political and religious institutions is a harbinger of a wider and more severe crisis, and propose how Quaker spirituality offers a way out of the impasse which is relevant not only to Friends but which is crucial to the entire human family.

The Paradox of Religion's Task

The religious enterprise is at once profoundly conservative and profoundly radical. This is a paradox which can be negotiated successfully only with great wisdom and great love. It is the failure of religious people to cope with this paradox which has caused so much of what is embarrassing, and even horrific, in the history of religion.

Religion is conservative in the sense that one of its main functions is to preserve, teach and and insure the continued availability of the gathered wisdom of the community, and to inspire love and enthusiasm for this wisdom. The great communities of faith, with their various scriptures and traditions, hold up for us a vision of human life expressing our best possibilities, showing us their nobility and attractiveness, drawing us to them. The vision of human life which such religion upholds is a complex fabric of attitudes, habits and practices which form a whole in a way which excites

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[1] John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," from *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness,* John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, editors. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987) page 29.

spiritual enthusiasm. Such a vision enables populations of countless millions of people to relate to each other so that life flows along in predictable and natural-seeming patterns which all, or most, can regard as appropriate and good. The spiritual formation which occurs starts in earliest childhood; people who grow up in different cultures are formed in different ways and in fundamental senses are different people than they might have been if brought up in an alternative cultural and religious context. One's culture is a very fundamental part of one's identity, even if one is an individualist who lives in a conflicted relationship with the culture of one's birth. The United Nations Human Rights Convention recognizes that one can commit genocide by suppressing a culture without necessarily murdering anyone, although in practical terms it is probably impossible to do one without also doing the other. But to prevent a people from living according to their culture is, in a very fundamental way, to obliterate their identity, their essential existence, even if they are technically alive.

It is the preservation and continuance of a series of answers to Pico's question, "What is a human being," in such a way that the answers are absorbed as a kind of "second nature" by vast populations which gives religion and its expression in culture a legitimate, essentially conservative character and function. For without such an operating religious culture human society would disintegrate in disorder and folly, as has been amply proven in history.

At the same time religion also carries out a profoundly radical function, for the religious sensibility must also critique the very culture the religion itself has spawned. This radical function is most conspicuous in the so-called axial ages when an old order is disintegrating and is being replaced by something new; but this radical function must continue in quiet as well as turbulent times. In axial or transition ages significant religious teachers have started communities of believers intended to be the beginning of a new culture: Jesus, Mohammed, the Buddha, Lao Tsu, Confucius, George Fox, Francis of Assisi. Such sages do not deny the importance of religion and religious culture. They have always understood that it is in relation to others in communities of faith operating through history that human beings are enabled to make the god-like choices that help them realize their magnificent potential. But they are revolutionary in the sense that they project a new way of conceiving such a faith community and seek to nurture a new kind of human being through a revised explanation of meaning and a revised pattern of living, and thus to generate a society better than any thus far seen on earth. The use of the term "revised" is important, for rarely do great spiritual teachers propose something entirely new; they are always syncretic, always ready to acknowledge the usefulness of that which has sustained others. The Christ and the Buddha, to cite two conspicuous examples, built upon the religious inheritance they found, rather than rejecting it *in toto*.

But the radical dimension of the religious sensibility is not only operative in great axial ages, as has been said, but ought also to function on a day-to-day basis, as conditions change, as new information and insight is gained, and as the inevitable lapses and shortcomings of governmental, social and religious institutions come into view. The religious sensibility in some sense stands outside of culture, even while upholding it, proposing constantly an enlargement of the sustaining vision and a greater perfectionism in the expression it is given by social institutions and practices.

The paradoxical nature of this mission which is at once conservative and radical needs special

caring and thoughtful attention on the part of concerned religious people. Sanctity can be viewed, in one way, as the ability to transcend paradoxes which offend the logical mind. Sanctity is the capacity to be as wise as a serpent and as innocent as a dove; it is to know the simultaneous exaltedness and fallennes of human nature; it is to realize both the immanence and the transcendence of God; it is to balance the imperatives of order and freedom; it is to practice both justice and mercy ("Justice without mercy is cruelty, while mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution," said Thomas Aquinas). These dichotomies offend the logical mind and tempt people and communities to land squarely on one side or the other of them. But in the lives of truly wise individuals and truly advanced spiritual communities a resolution of these paradoxes is somehow enacted, even if the way these polarities interpenetrate each other in their practice cannot be precisely articulated.

The failure of communities adequately to meet the challenge of the dichotomy between the conservative and the radical roles of religion often ends in schism, or even worse, in dreadful warfare. On the more hum-drum level it results in the well-known typology of religious culture which recognizes a distinction between a church and a sect. According to this analysis, a "church" is a place which affirms mainstream cultural values and which tends to uphold the existing order of things. Churches, then, tend to be lukewarm but secure places where the familiar reigns, and the culture of which tends to be indistinguishable from that of the society which surrounds them. A "sect," in contrast, advances a minority perspective. It has a unique, even radical, view of how things ought to be. It tends to be evangelical, seeking aggressively to make converts to its special views. It seeks to cling to behaviors and traditions which distinguish it from those around it, thereby maintaining a noticeable identity. The struggle needed to maintain its special views generates a kind of passionate commitment within its ranks rarely seen in the cooler atmosphere of a mainstream church.

The Marginalization of Religious Perspectives

In the history of European culture the failure of religious communities to cope with the paradoxes any spiritual movement must embrace, the failure successfully to nurture fellowship while at once preserving and reforming institutional and cultural forms, led to many calamitous civil and international wars. This in turn produced the remarkable result that people of goodwill were inspired to try to marginalize the religious perspectives upon which their own culture was based. As religious war and strife ground on relentlessly it came to seem useful to de-emphasize spiritual things and to rely on reason and human good nature to iron out arrangements. An alliance of science and reason seemed a surer basis for resolving problems than arcane disputes over theological issues. The church and the state were deemed best kept separate. The "laws" of the market, viewed as a kind of natural law, were allowed to govern economic arrangements in a way largely cut loose from any concept of social ethics.

We now are beginning to see that this accommodation which was reached, certainly of very humane inspiration at the time, in which reality was divided into two spheres, the sacred and the secular, and matters of the Spirit were marginalized to the fringes of life and to private spaces brings with it great problems. But in recognizing the problems it is important not to overlook the many

blessings this accommodation also brought -- an end to the worst forms of religious bloodshed, a period of unparalleled prosperity for North Atlantic civilization, and the growth of the institutions of democracy and the practices of free, civil society. One of the great, and hopefully lasting, contributions of the liberal Enlightenment begun in the seventeenth century is that it established a consensus that putting an end to religious warfare and intolerance is morally good and preferable to protracted attempts at imposing one's spiritual vision on others by force.

At the same time we face a series of extraordinary contemporary dilemmas stemming from this Enlightenment accommodation. The most conspicuous of these is the breakdown of discourse about social and political ethics in our society. Is not the most striking feature of contemporary public utterance about moral and spiritual questions impacting upon our common life the fact 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.[2]

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, the relationship between men and women, homosexuality, capital punishment, immigration policy, or prayer in public schools, we see, in contrast to this optimistic expectation upon which our democratic society is built, a pattern of vituperation 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 a decision of the United States Supreme Court to put the matter to rest.

The problem, 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, or at least of logical reasoning taking its point of departure from unambiguous and verifiable factual observation. 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 points 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.

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[2]Paraphrased from page 6 of *After Virtue* by Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). For a fuller discussion of this modern dilemma see Chapters Two and Three in this same book.

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 additional factual, scientific knowledge about fetal development, or any additional 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?

Even more disturbing than the seemingly unresolvable debates about conspicuous social issues like abortion, affirmative action, and homosexuality is the apparent absence of any wish or ability to discuss, in spiritual and ethical terms, the operations of the economy, except among few people with special axes to grind. Surely some of the most significant spiritual questions any society faces have to do with the distribution of the commonly generated product of labor, with the utilization of our common inheritance--the resources of the good earth, and with the need to preserve the earth for future generations of human and animal life. Yet with the rationalist, secularized view of life adopted during the age of the European Enlightenment the vast sphere of human activity we know as the economy seems to have been set loose to develop without reference to moral or spiritual principles, as if it were a scientific or natural phenomenon, rather than a human construct.

It is a salient characteristic of our society that we have in view no system of ends widely believed to be worth striving for *together*. We are left with a futile quest for purely private personal fulfillment which often ends in emptiness. Public discourse in such a context has been called "civil war carried on by other means." This would seem inevitable in the absence of a shared sense among people of a point or purpose, a final meaning to human life, a meaning which can provide a context for understanding and an opening to a mutually agreeable solution to whatever maladies of spirit, of ethics, or of politics may confront us.

There probably need not be more than a handful of unpremised First Premises envisioning the good human life and the good human society to provide the basis for a flourishing culture. But deriving from these the thousands of practices, habits, and attitudes of mind and heart which would give them expression in daily life, in governmental organization and policy, in commerce, and in the myriad institutions which uphold civilization is a monumental task. The structure of such derivative habits and practices is built up over time from experience and becomes part of the lore of the culture. Thus a culture is a system of mental attitudes, learned emotional responses, and political and social institutions, all of which tend to be bred into people in the family. This pattern of habits, behaviors and thoughts function as a kind of "second nature" in individuals, causing them to flow along in harmony with the prevailing ethos or direction of their culture without perceiving a limit to their individual freedom, because the ingrained attitudes and habits seem "natural," seem innate to their human nature. The idea that children should pick and choose their own spiritual principles through some sort of values clarification process, or that human beings should reach adulthood in some sort of blank state, and that they should then proceed to shop around for religious philosophies to their

liking in a market-place of beliefs is not only absurd in terms of the individuals' spiritual authenticity, but could not possibly result in a society which serves human well-being.

There is nothing in Enlightenment theory that would inhibit the development of a plurality of religious cultures in a society. Such a plurality of religious cultures would in theory allow for everyone to be brought up with some system of values, and therefore would not require of them the task of finding, on a person-by-person basis, the fundamental premises upon which to build a way of life. Yet in practice it seems that these separate religious cultures must be very indifferently adhered to by their followers, allowing only a kind of denatured rationalism and ennui to be the prevailing cultural norm, or these religious cultures will come into irreconcilable conflict, as has occurred over abortion and homosexuality. It would seem that the Enlightenment-derived culture which has characterized North Atlantic civilization for the last 300 years has been coasting on premises and values derived from Christianity, while simultaneously marginalizing and relativizing them, and that the exhaustion of the possibilities inherent in this process is now in view.

Culture, Human Sexuality, and Social Change

Cultures cannot be reinvented in every generation. The interrelated fabric of institutions, habits, attitudes of mind and spiritual convictions is simply too dense to remake frequently, even in an age so full of rapid change as ours. A culture's survival depends upon a process in which the accumulated patterns of decades and even centuries is absorbed as a kind of second nature in the home. This absorption can be reinforced, and rationales provided as individuals mature, by institutions outside the home, such as schools and churches. Values instilled in the home can also be undermined by alternative cultures, as commercialism and militarism tend to undermine Gospel perspectives. At any rate, if the family fails in its religious and cultural task, there seems to be little evidence that institutions can make up the loss, at least not on a massive scale. A widespread breakdown of family life seems to result, inevitably, in the demise of the culture of which the families were carriers. Where strong family life is nourished and maintained, cultures seem able to overcome enormous odds and flourish in even the most hostile circumstances.

Since cultures are complex webs of institutions, ideas, relationships and values which are absorbed by masses of people as a kind of second nature, it is scarcely conceivable that entire populations can remake their personalities, their identities, very suddenly. A few visionaries and a small collection of disciples may be able to do so; masses of people cannot. Attempts to produce planned change of a fundamental sort involving large populations invariably requires the likes of Stalin and Pol Pot and is doomed to failure, however much horror may be produced in the course of reaching the failure. The shift of Hellenic culture during the times of the Roman Empire from paganism to Christianity in a mere three hundred years represents an example of extraordinary rapidity for fundamental cultural change.

One of the fundamental tasks of culture is the formation of attitudes and practices through which human sexuality is engaged in the task of insuring individual and cultural survival. Human

sexuality shows itself to be a disorderly impulse. Liberals do not like to hear this, for it reminds them of a Puritanism which they regard as having destructively inculcated psychic repression and shame with respect to an aspect of life which they see as innately good, an aspect of life which, if left in its natural state, would be only a source of legitimate satisfaction expressing the Creator's intent. Intrusions by society-at-large into an area of life deemed ultimately very personal and very private violate the tendency of Enlightenment culture to absolutize issues of personal freedom, a legacy cherished equally by radicals and conservatives in contemporary America. Finally, the difficulties we face in this area of life are compounded by the regrettable reality that, almost universally, the attempt of cultures to shape practices relating to sexuality and family life have been closely interwoven with enormous collateral damage in the form of patriarchy and the oppression of women.

Yet it is difficult to look at the post-sexual-revolution landscape and remain entirely sanguine about liberal suppositions. The fact that large state bureaucracies seem overwhelmed with the task of protecting children from their own parents, the growth of degrading forms of entertainment focussed upon sex, the frequency of rape and other sex-related crimes, and numerous miseries caused by the breakdown of marriage and family life all would indicate that this area of human experience is not as simple as paradigms preferred by liberals would have us believe. We must face the reality that there seems to be no successful society which has not organized itself aggressively to cultivate the sexual nature of the human person in directions deemed life-affirming. Whether cultures accomplish this task by actually molding the sexual natures of men and women in desired directions, or whether they merely drive unwanted sexual proclivities underground and out-of-the-way, remains a matter of debate.

At any rate, this task of nurturing life-affirming and survival-enhancing habits, beliefs, attitudes, and institutions regarding sexuality is one which cultures accomplish primarily through home and family life and its imagery, which is picked up and understood by young human beings simply as part of the natural order of things, as "second nature." It is not something cultures tend to accomplish through rational discussion among adults about legitimate and illegitimate modes of sexual expression. Being deeply imbedded in the psyche as part of the processes through which culture molds human identity, our attitudes about sexuality are an extremely difficult area to deal with as a subject for social change.

Issues of Sexuality Symbolize Larger Contemporary Dilemmas

We are all utterly dependent upon the health and good order of the culture which sustains us. Human physical survival and spiritual satisfaction depend upon a system of complimentary interrelationships, upon community. Such a complex web of interrelationships is made possible and is sustained by shared habits, practices and concepts about the meaning of human life which are defined and passed along through the cultural project. At the basis of every human culture are a series of unpremised First Premises, usually seen as having a divine source. Cultures are thus closely associated with religion. These premises give expression to spiritual issues and to questions of meaning with which scientific method simply cannot connect, and which cannot be derived from the

processes of reason. Cultures inculcate a sense of the content of these premises, often a subconscious sense, and inspire commitment to them, primarily through nurture in the family, supported by institutions in the wider society. In this process the culture also affirms a host of derivative principles which, although deductible from the premises, cannot be the focus of rational consideration in every human life, for the task would simply be too great for any but full-time philosophers.

Within any culture the religious enterprise must embrace the paradoxical task of preserving the substance of the culture while at the same time of critiquing it in a way which allows for needed renewal and for an enlarging grasp of the power of the premises and the possibilities of their consistent application, as well as for adjustments to new conditions. The failure of religious institutions in North Atlantic civilization to embrace both sides of this paradox resulted in disastrous religious warfare, which in turn bred a futile hope that science and reason would provide a mode of deliverance. The focus on science and reason has produced spectacular achievements in technology and wealth accumulation (but not wealth distribution), but it has also eroded the spiritual basis upon which any culture depends, giving our era many of the characteristics of a dark age.

The reason why issues such as homosexuality and abortion have become such distressing symbols of what has come to be called a culture war is that they challenge people in their fundamental sense of identity as persons, and call into question what has been regarded as the self-evident right ordering of human life inculcated in non-rational or pre-rational ways as part of the cultural task; the issues also seem to symbolize the modernist and post-modernist tendency to elevate private satisfactions to a place which totally eclipses public necessity and cultural cohesion; and, finally, they exhibit what appears to many people to be the diabolical talent of the rationalist and scientific world-view for constantly deconstructing cultural values while being utterly incompetent at establishing a convincing basis for a successor social order. A "flash point" issue such as homosexuality, which, although difficult and challenging given its closeness to the elemental and instinctual aspects of cultural cohesion, is a legitimate focus of attention in what ought to be religion's on-going attempt to perfect the application of our culture's spiritual values while also preserving them. However, efforts to deal with homosexuality have suffered due to their getting enmeshed in the generally muddled state of affairs, and from having the issues invested by all parties with a symbolic significance relating to wider cultural maladies.

The Need to Rediscover Truth

Where then do the Truths which form the basis of human culture and human life come from? How do we determine the unpremised First Premises from which the intermediate and practical ways of knowing and enacting Truth are derived? At one time the Bible, the life and ministry of Jesus, and Christian traditions provided a system of interrelated attitudes, habits and beliefs which was shared by most non-Jewish people in this culture. This provided a kind of framework for dialogue, a starting place, a point of reference, when issues arose. Today, however, our social life, our political system, and our culture have been completely emancipated from their religious roots, an emancipation which has resulted in the progressive loss of consensus regarding moral truth. As a consequence, we seem

to be experiencing a kind of persistent social disintegration. Today, familiarity with Christian teaching has faded, and the Biblical narratives and the vocabulary of Christian faith are no longer common currency. As a universalist Friend with unorthodox religious views, let me hasten to acknowledge that I feel that in many respects this is a liberation and a blessing. But the negative side is that there no longer exists a common language to form the basis of public culture.

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 the 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 fundamental answers, 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.

We desperately need a way to mediate between the extremes of over-certainty, dogmatism and absolutism, the diseases of the fundamentalist 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.

A Challenge for Friends

I believe that Quaker experience and practice can speak powerfully to this contemporary dilemma. But for it to do so, Quakerism itself needs renewal. It needs to be rescued from a too-easy accommodation to the trends and styles of liberal secularism. For example, it is often thought that Quakerism advances a kind of individualistic spirituality. Modern Quakerism can easily take on the characteristics of a Ranterism from which early Friends were always careful to distinguish themselves. Rather than being a collection of individualists each inventing his or her own religion free from the encumbrances of hierarchies and creeds, Quakerism is more accurately understood as the practice of a kind of corporate mysticism, a highly disciplined procedure for discernment through which the prophetic function operates collectively.

Essential to the Quaker understanding of unity-based discernment is founder George Fox's conviction 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 Truth 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 spiritual discipline requiring much patience. In the history of the Religious Society of Friends, some key problems have been labored over for as long as a century before unity was found.

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."

(Another) . . . "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, above 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."

As Friends seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in discerning the unpremised First Premises, it is important that our corporate seeking for a way forward be 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 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 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. We are prepared to esteem both the radical and the conservative dimensions of religion's cultural task.

But forward movement, reform from within, is not necessarily an easy thing. Religion's conservative face justly realizes that 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, 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.

Probably no one active in today's communities of faith would have anticipated a decade ago that they would eventually be called upon to give as much attention to the issue of homosexuality as now is needed in church life. But as one regards the Religious Society of Friends today, a small part of the religious world indeed, one sees the issue affecting the life of meetings in many different places and in different branches of the Religious Society of Friends. In fact, it would seem impossible to contemplate the current state of the Religious Society of Friends without facing the matter of homosexuality and its spiritual and practical impact. Moreover, we see that the matter generates fear, anxiety, visceral reactions, active avoidance strategies, polarization, and conflict. But one also observes instances where threshing through the issue brings healing, new life, the inspiring heroism of long laboring, and a love which transcends differences.

A recent Issues Program conference at Pendle Hill brought together Friends to share with each other stories about how different meetings in different places were dealing with the matter of same gender relationships and with proposals for allowing marriages or ceremonies of commitment under the care of Friends meetings for homosexual couples. The discussion revealed some uncertainty throughout the Society of Friends regarding what our concept of "Gospel Order" requires of us when a proposal to change long-standing attitudes and practices is brought forth. How does the Religious Society of Friends decide to change or to reaffirm existing values? Monthly meeting by monthly meeting? Yearly meeting by yearly meeting? It is clear that there are differently defined expectations about the relationship among yearly meetings, quarterly meetings and monthly meetings in different places, but even these defined expectations and other commonly accepted Quaker business practices are violated under the stress which the issue of homosexuality causes. How can we distinguish between the responsible reaffirmation of truth by leaders and officials, on the one hand, and the premature foreclosure of legitimate discussion, on the other? To what extent do local Friends need to be mindful of the beliefs and feelings of other Friends in other monthly meetings, quarterly meetings, yearly meetings and in other branches of the Religious Society of Friends when discerning about a new vision or proposal? Is it more useful to consider questions such as homosexuality and ceremonies of commitment or marriage abstractly, or when there are actual people involved who are part of the life of the meeting and who make a request of the meeting? How much diversity of practice and experimentation is allowable among different meetings during a period of uncertainty for the Religious Society of Friends as a whole? How should people holding a minority perspective be treated within the Religious Society of Friends? Are Friends really committed to our faith that the Holy Spirit is available to us, and that there are practices which can help to free us from human contrivance, making a space in which the voice of God will be heard? Are Friends prepared to surrender, to be led?

In other words, although Friends have spirituality which informs our discernment process as

we gather as communities of faith to manage local matters within monthly meetings, we seem not to have a clear idea, or much precedent, for applying this spirituality to issues which are more global in scope. In the past our Religious Society seems to have been as prone as other groups to suffer schisms before the Light around which all could unite came into view.

In other words, the nature of the spiritual disciplines we practice to discern the will of God which brings us into unity are somewhat clearer than are the actual procedures for effecting them when denomination-wide issues are at stake. The pluralism implied by Quakerism's "congregationalist" approach to church governance, wherein the source of authority is deemed to reside with monthly meetings, is probably a strength in that concrete experience can be gained through different approaches from which the entire Religious Society might be illuminated. Since Friends have always related spiritual knowledge with direct experience, a true and lasting assessment of the wisdom or lack thereof homosexual marriage, for example, might be gained by the conscientious practice of it by meetings so led which others can benefit from as they seek a way forward. The weakness of the "congregationlist" approach is that, without adequate communication, meeting after meeting will "reinvent the wheel," perhaps even repeating mistakes. Also, where subtle, difficult and far-reaching issues are under review, it is not reasonable to expect local congregations to be able to research and gather all the pertinent experience, documentation and scholarship which might be available on a given subject. It is Pendle Hill's mission to help Friends through its Issues Program by serving as a place where experience and insight can be gathered, assessed, shared and disseminated in a way which supports the worshipful search for Truth on the local level.

In the over three hundred year history of the Religious Society of Friends there has probably been only one issue, the issue of slavery, where a profound reassessment of the Quaker community's values resulted in significant change. So, in contemplating the process of discernment as historically experienced in our Religious Society of Friends, it is particularly useful to look closely at the matter of the clearing of the Religious Society of Friends of slave holding, a matter with which the life and work of the now well-known Friend John Woolman was directly connected.

First, Friends were the first community of people in western history corporately to espouse and practice the abolition of slavery. Slavery has been practiced in our culture beginning with the ancient Hebrews. Through the centuries, the institution of slavery has enjoyed the support of religious bodies who could cite much scriptural authority in favor of their views. Although in Biblical writings the escape of the Hebrews from their own enslavement by the Egyptians is regarded as a good thing, nowhere is slavery in general forbidden in the Bible. In fact, the theme there is often one of telling people to be obedient and respectful to their masters. At any rate, slavery experienced a kind of grand climax with the expansion of western Europeans into the New World. To inquire why the institution of slavery did finally fall into universal disfavor is to address a singularly momentous change in history, a change for which Friends were in the avant garde.[3]

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[3] For a more thorough discussion of the abolition of slavery within the Religious Society of Friends, see *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1708-1783* by Jack D. Marietta (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), especially pages 111-128. Basing his conclusions on an extensive study of other scholarly research about

It is also interesting to note that although Friends were in the avant garde of abolition, and although they had cleared our Religious Society of slave holding a hundred years before the horrors of the Civil War, Quakerism was nevertheless itself one hundred years old before clearness about the matter was reached! It seems to me that this is one of the most riveting aspects of the matter to contemplate. How could Friends have taken so long to achieve clearness about so transparent an evil? Or, referring again to Isaac Penington, what does it mean to avoid suddenness and inconsiderateness of spirit, to wait much, to be meek and cool, when sitting in contemplation of my Quaker neighbor's practice of buying and selling human beings as private property? Is this some grotesque mismatch between a picturesque sectarian refinement and a monstrous social evil? What meaning can this one hundred years of patient threshing over slavery have for us today as we ponder issues like abortion, or same gender unions?

The simple fact is that people cannot be so pliable about the really deep questions in life, the questions with respect to which any competent culture has induced deeply imbedded attitudes, that they can be expected to negotiate about them amiably, or to trust them to an election. The tragedy of the American Civil War is an illustration of this. Truly inestimable things like slavery, abortion, the values which uphold the family, or freedom and dignity for sexual minorities, can scarcely be entrusted to elections unless you are willing to have it either way, unless you believe that since there is no Truth, whatever the majority prefers, although it is merely a matter of taste, nevertheless should hold sway on that account alone. Santayana observed of liberal democracy that it only works if the questions at issue are relatively minor matters. This is why we see again and again that people either become indifferent to issues of faith, lapsing into a kind of lukewarm relativism, or else they are apt to wind up in fratricidal strife. It is why, although we cannot live by bread alone, our spiritual convictions so often in history have led to repression and violence.

I am not proposing that the solution to the religious and cultural dilemma of modern society is to be solved by drawing entire populations into the Religious Society of Friends. Nor am I suggesting that Quakers, as a minority *pacifist* sect, expect to function as "peacemakers," applying their skill at mediation to conflicts between religious fundamentalists and secular liberals. Such mediation, as way opens, might be a genuine service, but it is not likely to be sufficient to address the fundamental dilemma of identifying the unpremised First Premises and working out their implications in daily life. It is not likely to be sufficient to address the problem of re-establishing for modern people a vision of life which is noble and attractive and which excites a spiritual enthusiasm around which most can unite.

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the problem of slavery in European and American culture, Marietta states unequivocally that Friends were the first community of people in western history corporately to espouse and practice the abolition of slavery. Others have pointed out to me, however, that Anabaptists and Mennonites opposed slavery earlier than Friends did, and indeed members of those movements are thought never to have owned slaves. Marietta and his sources may base their assertions on the fact that Friends were the first people corporately to reverse themselves and to change their attitudes and practice. It is also possible that a climate of anti-slavery attitudes existed in the other groups without their ever having passed official denomination-wide policy statements. Perhaps more research needs to be done about this.

What is suggested is that the conscientious practice of our discernment process, of our search for unity, within the Religious Society of Friends will be a compelling example to others. If we truly await the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will be led to a way of life that others will find engaging and will emulate. This has happened many times in the past. Friends' leadings in education, in the equality of women and men, in race relations, in the treatment of the mentally ill, and even in commerce and government, came to be widely acknowledged as worthy of emulation. But what this requires of us in present circumstances is that we learn to love both sides of religion's paradoxical role, that we learn to love the work of discernment, and that we cease importing into the life of the Religious Society of Friends the impatience and polarization characteristic of the current disorders of our civil society.

Our ability as Friends to practice meekness, coolness, and stillness of spirit, to articulate the truth we see faithfully but circumspectly, to love each other steadfastly while addressing differences, to avoid the distancing each from the other which leads to alienation and even to hostility, and to wait *even* a hundred years for unity to emerge, *even* when dealing with issues which most people find it normal to feel and act passionately about, is not something we can do out of simple human patience. It is not something we can do without the aid of the Holy Spirit. But if, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, we are able to practice the discipline of our discernment process successfully, we make a gift not only to ourselves, and not only to the Religious Society of Friends. For in a world where the center does not hold, a world in which a blood-dimmed tide has been loosed, a world where the worst are full of passionate intensity, we can make a witness that there is, indeed, another way. We acknowledge that feeling certain is not proof in itself that one is right; that many have felt certain, and many have killed for things which have turned out not to be so. Jonathan Swift lamented that people have just enough religion to make them hate each other, but not enough to make them love each other. Indeed, the disciplines of our discernment process are an integral part of our peace testimony and of our social transformation strategy. By trying much, waiting much, and loving much, even when momentous issues are laid before us, we demonstrate that it is possible to have enough religion to overcome brokenness and fragmentation with reconciliation, to grow, to change, to love, to know Truth, to live in peace and to build justice.

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 the virtues described by Penington, is the key to the modern dilemma. 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. Dialogue in this deep sense consists of speaking the Truth as we understand it and in listening to others as they speak from their

understanding.

When this dialogue is pursued in the spirit of love and tenderness revelation and community happen, and cultural and social change follows naturally, but not without patient effort. But as through worship the more profound possibilities of our human nature become visible to us, we are enabled gradually to grow into what we know we are meant to be. And in the same measure to which we come alive to our own possibilities, we become alive and alert as well to the needs of others. Thus we discover a way of life worthy of our profoundest enthusiasm, a way of life which is nonviolent, sensitive and caring, a way of life which tirelessly finds concrete, practical ways to move the human estate closer to the City of God. By living this way of life fully and faithfully we in fact do not labor for ourselves alone. For so to live is to let our lives pour out teaching like prophesy; so to live is to prepare a place worthy of all people, so to live is to build a new society, so to live is to prepare a place where future generations can make their home.

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April 30, 1996

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