Gathered for Greatness?

A Reflection on
Identity, Authority and Community
in the Religious Society of Friends

By Daniel A. Seeger

". . . and the Lord let me see a-top of the hill in what places he had a great people to be gathered."

George Fox, a founder of the Religious Society of Friends,
describing his experience on Pendle Hill in1652.

The meaning of our existence lies in something outside ourselves, something to which we owe loyalty and gratitude.

This is the first principle around which the religious sensibility is organized. The implications of this fundamental principle are developed in different ways by different religious cultures and communities, but the sense that we must move beyond love of self to love of something beyond the self is basic to all. Religion begins with the realization that something is asked of us, that we ourselves are not the end of our own existence, but that there are ends which are in need of us. To be religious is to understand that to live as if our individual egos were all that matters makes of life an intolerable burden.

This search for a meaning outside of ourselves applies not only to individual human beings, but to spiritual communities as well. Members of spiritual communities gather around shared answers to the question: "What does the Lord require of us as a people?" Given the current state of human affairs, what, in the unfolding destiny of the Creation, would a Spirit-led people do, to what would they witness, what pattern of life would they adopt in order to address the needs of their fellow human beings now and in the future? How would they as a people be patterns and examples of a culture which would support the next phase of human development?

Thus, in order to think clearly about identity, authority, and community in the Religious Society of Friends at the very end of the twentieth century it is necessary to have some basic principles about the religious enterprise in view, and also to understand the essential dilemmas of the human condition in both their abiding aspects and in their unique way of manifesting in our own day.

For the religious sensibility there exists at the foundation of reality a mysterious Presence, Supreme Being, Creative Agency, Deity, or Principle of Lawfulness which, although beyond our human capacity fully to understand or grasp, is nevertheless close enough to express a Truth of which we can become aware and to embody a Goodness for which we thirst and to which we can resonate in our way living. Even Buddhism, sometimes thought of as a non-theistic religion, would fit this general characterization. Most religious cultures seem to have discovered empirically or experientially that to know this Truth and to live in a way expressive of this Goodness requires that

we rid ourselves of self-centeredness. All religious cultures offer strategies for transcending ego-driven desires which seem to obscure the perception of Truth and Goodness. The idea of gaining our life by losing it, the metaphorical dimension of the crucifixion, various Eastern religious disciplines for practicing emptiness or mindfulness, the use of mantras or the Jesus prayer, the Quaker practice of inner silence, the tonsure, uniform garb, the abandonment of personal given names associated with the ego structure for religious names associated with desired spiritual virtues, and the discipline of living in community are among the insights and practices through which religious traditions seek to overcome what Thomas Merton describes as the "rigidity and harshness and coarseness of our ingrained egoism," an egoism which he further describes as "the one insuperable obstacle to the infused light and action of the Spirit of God."[1] Or, as it has also been said, "the Truth awaits eyes unclouded by longing."

But while ego-driven longing is an obstacle to authentic living based upon spiritual truth, there also exists in the human soul a pure longing, a longing for Truth itself. In this sense we are all seekers. We all carry within us a great question. In fact, one's very life itself is a quest, a search. At some times we are more aware of this than at other times. Sometimes the question within us is sharply etched. Sometimes it is vague, subconscious, or unformulated. But when Jesus said that we cannot live by bread alone, he was speaking of this great question within us and of our need for a corresponding great answer.

This great answer which we seek is indeed given to us. We not only seek, we also find. Sometimes what we are meant to find is given to a person in a blinding flash, suddenly, in an instant. To other people it comes slowly and gradually over time. But however it arrives, there comes upon us a great experience of absolute spirit and a leading to transform the way we live out our life in the world. Thus, the answer comes both as new knowledge, as a new awareness of Truth, but also as a transformed way of being, of acting, of living.

It is important to understand that what we seek and what it is given to us to find makes us new persons. In religious life we try to describe this transforming experience in different ways: we are born again, we repent, we are justified or sanctified. In the original Greek version of the New Testament the word that frequently appears in this connection is *metanoia*. The prefix "meta" means beyond, and appears in such English words as metaphysics or metamorphosis. The root "noia" or nuos refers to the self. In metanoia we are taken beyond our old self, we are transformed. At its root, then, this seeking after the bread of life has something to do with our identity, with our nature, with who we are.

But in this human psyche, along side this pure and honest seeking for transformation, there is also a propensity for vanity, as has been mentioned -- a kind of self-seeking and self-absorption. This is related to a natural love of life and a need for self-preservation, and probably became ingrained in human nature during long eras of evolution before the organization of human society as we presently know it, when an individual's survival depended upon it. Even today, each one of us, as an

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[1]See *New Seeds of Contemplation* by Thomas Merton (New York, New Directions Books, 1962). pg. 191

infant, has spent the earliest years of our conscious existence in a "demand and get" mode. This imprinting must somehow be overcome as we mature. But whatever its origin, this tendency of the human person to become absorbed in his or her own needs and to objectify the rest of the Creation, including other human beings, as a means for meeting one's own needs, is a haunting, abiding human characteristic, the evidence of which is on display all about us. The coexistence in human nature of a hunger for a pure kind of spiritual truth coexisting with egotism and selfishness accounts for the paradox of the simultaneous exaltedness and fallenness of human nature. Addressing this paradox is one of the key missions of religious culture. This struggle between the love of self and the love of something beyond the self in human affairs will end, presumably, with the triumph of selflessness. This will indeed represent a second coming of the Christ and be the end of history as we presently understand it. Such a state of affairs is probably a long way off.

Spiritual cultures cohere around visions which assuage our natural and pure hunger to know the Truth and to live in a way which gives expression to its goodness and lawfulness. Most spiritual sages have realized that for human beings to advance significantly on the spiritual path social structures must change. Except for a very few exceptional individuals, people cannot and do not alter their lives significantly all by themselves. The world cannot be saved simply by trying to save individual persons. The social structures within which individuals live must also be saved. Most cultures are based on religious premises, and are, in fact, at root, spiritual formation systems. People who grow up in different societies and different historical periods are formed in different ways. They become quite different persons than they would have been if they had grown up elsewhere. For example, American culture, which values individualism and originality, produces, in general, rather different personalities than a culture which places high esteem on family and clan loyalty and on respect for tradition.

All religious movements seeking to uplift human life have recognized that community formation is an essential aspect of our growth both as individuals and as a people gathered to enact a spiritual vision. Thus, most significant religious teachers have started communities of believers intended to be the beginning of a new culture; this is true of, Jesus, Mohammed, the Buddha, George Fox, and Francis of Assisi. The great communities of faith such people have inaugurated often, but not always, become very large.

One of the main functions of religion is to preserve, to teach, and to insure the continued availability of the gathered wisdom of an entire culture, and to inspire love and enthusiasm for this wisdom. With their various scriptures and traditions, the great communities of faith 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 a religion upholds incorporates a complex fabric of attitudes, habits, and practices which form a whole in a way which inspires us and excites spiritual enthusiasm, and which often succeeds in orienting and defining entire civilizations. Such religious visions enable populations of countless millions of people to relate to each other so that life flows along in predictable and natural-seeming patterns which almost everyone can regard as appropriate and good. It is probably fair to say that however flawed various religious institutions and religious systems may have proven to be in actual practice, they are, in general, compassionate in *intent* in that

they seek to foster a right-ordering of human life which will maximize well-being. In order to understand fully the interrelated issues of identity, authority, and community among Friends, it is first necessary to recognize that there is a legitimate *conservative* dimension to Spirit-led or religious community formation. A religious community exists, at least in part, to preserve, to teach, and to insure the continuation of a spiritual vision.

At the same time, there is also a *revolutionary* dimension to Spirit-led community formation. This revolutionary function is most conspicuous in times of transition, when the old order is disintegrating and being replaced by something new. We ourselves live in an age when a new civilization is seeking to be born. Evidences of this abound everywhere and they need not be enumerated here. In ages of transition, significant religious teachers have started communities of believers intended to be the beginning of a new culture. Such sages are revolutionary in the sense that they project a revised vision or faith, and seek to nurture a new kind of human being through a revised pattern of community, hoping to inspire a new way of living and a new society, a better society 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 what 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*.

The radical dimension of the religious and community-building task, while most obvious in ages of transition, must also be kept in view in quieter times. Conditions slowly but inexorably change. New information and insight is gained, and the inevitable short-comings of governmental, social, and religious institutions come into view. The religious sensibility must somehow stand outside of cultural and social arrangements, even while upholding them, proposing constantly an enlargement of the sustaining vision and a greater perfection in the expression it is given in institutions and practices.

It is important to understand that every religious culture, including the religious culture of Quakerism, must participate in both the conservative and revolutionary tasks of religion and of the community-building and culture-generating enterprise. Allowing these two aspects of the religious task -- the conservative and the revolutionary -- to interpenetrate each other, rather than dichotomizing them and then opting wholly for one pole or the other, requires wisdom and spiritual maturity, a wisdom and spiritual maturity which seems, regrettably, quite uncommon.

While the various religious cultures which have flourished during humankind's long sojourn on earth have assembled awesome resources for our insight and inspiration, religious history has also been plagued by various forms of malpractice. Indeed, one can scarcely regard the vast panorama of religious cultures without some sense of unease and misgiving. Rigidity, intolerance, and co-option by the very egoism they seek to counter seem to be the vulnerable points of religious cultures universally.

Religious cultures tend to carry out the conservative task of the religious enterprise more vigorously and enthusiastically than they do the revolutionary task. The routine affirmation, practice,

and passing-on of religious culture seems to get carried out in a way resistant either to gradual or to dramatic change, regardless of what circumstances warrant. This seems to make of religious history a turbulent saga embracing extended periods of oppressive rigidity followed by explosive reform.

Intolerance, too, plagues some of the most significant religious cultures, although not all of them. Religious communities can be given to insisting that their own way of seeing things is the only correct way. They can seek to stamp out alternative visions, even using state power and warfare (and, in times past, torture) in order to do so.

Part of this regrettable picture is the heroism or fanaticism (depending upon one's perspective) of people willing to endure incredible hardships out of loyalty to their own religious movement, culture, or vision.

In some respects these phenomena are interrelated and arise from the sometimes unequal contention between a religious vision and human egoism. In its relentless struggle against the rapacious forces of self-centeredness, religion will be inclined to overstate its case. Subtlety, deference, and tolerance are often deemed dysfunctional in a titanic conflict. But what starts out as a struggle against the evil inherent in human nature turns ugly as alternative religious perspectives, which, by their very existence suggest ambiguity in the possible approaches to the human situation, appear to be subversions that must be relentlessly fought. Fanaticism and extremism stem from this sense of struggle against a never-to-be-vanquished evil.

Finally, the religious enterprise itself can often be fatally corrupted by the very egoism it seeks to counter. Religions can resort to "pie in the sky promises," thereby feeding a concern of the ego with itself, rather than dampening it. Ecclesiastical hierarchies and powerful social groups can exploit peoples' religious sensibilities for their own selfish purposes. Even rank and file people in the pews can come to use religion simply as a means for ego-centered bliss, tranquillity, inner-calm, and a self-satisfied sense of virtue and righteousness.

Quakerism as a religious movement, and modern secular society as a political and social culture, both sprang up in response to the failures of traditional Christianity to transcend the dangers inherent in the religious enterprise. The paradoxical nature of the religious mission, which is at once both conservative and radical, always needs special caring and thoughtful attention on the part of concerned religious people and their leadership. 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 good will were inspired to try to marginalize the religious perspectives upon which their own culture was based. As religious war and strife wore 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.

"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 are now beginning to see that this accommodation which was reached out of what was certainly a very humane inspiration at the time, an accommodation in which reality was divided into two spheres, the sacred and the secular, and where 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] Certainly there is little doubt that, at least in the society of the United States, the polarization between religious fundamentalism, whether Christian, Jewish or Islamic, and post-modern secular liberalism is reaching crises proportions.

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, at least writing as an American, 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, 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 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 is that moral and spiritual claims, unlike factual claims, cannot be proven by testable hypothesizes. 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

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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 2 and 3 of this same book.

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 the Republic of the United States of America 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 we are surrounded by an ethical chaos which has become 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 murder is wrong; everyone agrees that each individual deserves the protection of the community. Indeed, these are the hallmarks of our civilization. But everyone cannot agree when a 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 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. 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 the good earth as our common inheritance, and with the need to preserve the earth for future generations of life in all its diversity. The operations of the market frequently mock the principles of justice and fairness in the present, and certainly take absolutely no account of the claims of future generations. 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 principals, 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.

As we consider the issues of identity, authority, and community in Quakerism one of the things we must decide is whether the situation we observe within our Religious Society manifests an infection of our religious fellowship by the diseases which surround it, or whether, rather, we are perceiving the evolution within Quakerism of a vision which promises a way out of current human dilemmas. Is the state of the Society of Friends simply a manifestation of the troubles which have overtaken our common life everywhere, or is there in process the formulation of a vision which can undergird the new culture which is seeking to come to birth?

In seeking to address this question I am going to confine my consideration to the unprogrammed branch of the Religious Society of Friends. Questions of identity, authority and community as applied to the entire spectrum of religious bodies and movements which trace their lineage to George Fox and the valiant sixty, including evangelical Friends, programmed Friends, and unprogrammed Friends, is a matter of great interest, but is one which will be reserved for another occasion. For the moment I would like to explore the current state of the unprogrammed branch of the Religious Society of Friends with respect to issues of identity, authority and community.

When a community, an organization, or a movement is undergoing transition, or when it is in the process of breakdown, when "the center no longer holds," it is sometimes very difficult to generalize about the state of affairs within it, since many contradictory ideas can be held within the group. The patterns of these ideas constantly shift, and, in the absence of the sort of vigorous review which is likely to characterize more settled groups, utterly contradictory values can be held, even held passionately, by the same individual without any particular awareness of the contradictions.

To sort all this out it would be useful if an individual researcher, or team of researchers, could methodically review changes in the disciplines and in the statements of Faith and Practice of major Yearly Meetings. It would also be useful if someone trained in research methodology would survey the members of Yearly Meetings regarding essential religious beliefs, attitudes, practices and views. At present I know of only one such survey, to which I will refer later. In the absence of this sort of careful methodological research, one is left resorting to anecdotal impressions gained in the course of travels, or gained in the course of speaking with other Friends who have extensive experience in the traveling ministry. While generalizations based on personal experience should be regarded with caution, they are not necessarily valueless. Alexis de Tocqueville arrived at penetrating insights during his travels through the United States in the nineteenth century, doing so without sophisticated research methods. His observations of the society of the United States of America are respected to this day.

Clearly the "creedlessness" of the Religious Society of Friends is something in which many contemporary Meeting members and attenders take great satisfaction. Many celebrate the Religious Society of Friends as a place where they can be completely "free," and where no indelicate challenges will be offered to whatever religious convictions they arrived with. Often people favoring the idea that our Religious Society's salient characteristic is its non-creedalism will acknowledge that spiritual growth and development are desirable, but such development will be presumed to spring from within each of us as individuals according to a dynamic rooted in each person's own nature, rather than as

a result of any tutelage one might receive from the Meeting as a corporate body. In fact, there is often a kind of prickliness which is manifested if anything about Meeting life threatens to interfere with a person's being fully himself or herself. The logical extension of this train of thought is a vision of a religious society which is an informal gathering of people who do not fit into anyone else's religion, each of whom invents his or her own religion, and who are tied together mainly by the common ethic that none will rock another's boat. I would not claim that there is any particular monthly meeting which has actually reached this state of affairs, but it is the logical end to which a certain train of thought about the Religious Society of Friends tends to lead; it is a condition to which some Meetings I know of have come fairly close.

One Friend, Ben Pink Dandelion, spent four years of doctoral research interviewing, listening to, and surveying Friends in Britain Yearly Meeting. He found that there is a kind of certainty around the opposition to creedal statements of belief which is in itself a creedal attitude. That is, there is a creedal attitude about the belief that Quakers as a group do not have creeds. At the same time there is also a sacralization of silence. To be a Friend in Britain, according to Ben Pink Dandelion, you do not need to believe in God, but you need to follow the set of implicit and explicit rules around if, when, and how one breaks the silence. "Discipline is maintained around the form of Quakerism, through elders and clerks, but not over its content." In the modern liberal reinvention of Quakerism form is prescribed while interpretation of the experience the form is designed to produce and protect is strictly individual.[3]

Furthermore, according to Ben Pin Dandelion, his survey revealed that certainty is not allowed in what he calls the modern, liberal reinvention of Quakerism. Lack of certainty is part of the behavioral creed. His survey revealed that nearly a quarter of British Friends are agnostic.

As indicated, Ben Pink Dandelion's sociological research was undertaken in Britain Yearly Meeting. From my vantage point on the American side of the Atlantic, and without the careful research methodology which Ben Pink Dandelion has employed, the situation seems somewhat less stark than Ben's report. There is an allegiance to the Peace Testimony and to a non-violent approach to conflict resolution which appears firmly embedded in American Quaker culture, in spite of some erosion due to transient enthusiasms for wars of liberation in the 1960's and 1970's. Commitment to gender equality and to racial justice also seem to be widely accepted articles of faith, however imperfectly we may fail to live up to them. The Testimony of Simplicity, after some decades of neglect, has elicited new interest, mainly in response to thinking about issues of economic justice and ecological rescue. Where the picture which Ben Pink Dandelion draws with respect to Britain Yearly Meeting seems also to hold true in large areas of American unprogrammed Quakerism (again, in the impression of a frequent traveler) has to do with matters of belief or faith content which are congruent with the creedal statements of traditional Christian churches.

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[3]See *When the Means Becomes the End: Liberal Friends and the "Eternal Now"* by Ben Pink Dandelion, May 18, 1997.

Of course, it remains to be seen if a faith content confined to certain social testimonies, originally thought of as springing from an experience of the living Christ, can continue to live on their own, cut off from what early Friends thought of as the root. This is a question to which we will return later. Suffice it for the present to say only that the Quakerism which exists now, and the Quakerism toward which it is evolving if present trends continue, would be scarcely recognizable to George Fox and members of the valiant sixty, who, although they were skeptical about the "professors" of creeds, nevertheless shared vast chunks of belief content with their fellow Christians, while at the same time maligning them (George Fox, on at least one occasion, dismissed mainstream Christianity as nothing but "seventeen centuries of apostasy"). It may be a paradox or an inconsistency, but early Friends, while excoriating "professors," nevertheless would probably have been quite startled if it had been suggested that as Friends they need not be concerned about holding to any beliefs or values in common. George Fox frequently proclaimed what Friends beliefs were, and delineated the nature of the Friends faith community to all and sundry, including making such interpretations to the king himself.

Early Friends, in opposing creeds, were opposing religious superficiality. They were opposing formulaic religion which was elaborately cerebrated about, but which was not deeply felt or honestly and authentically lived. They were opposing rote religion of handed-down ideas, ideas which were frequently manipulated by aristocratic oppressors for their own benefit. They were opposing a spiritual ossification unresponsive to conditions then current. But early Friends were not advocating a contentless faith or an anarchic religious community. In fact, George Fox and the first generation of Friends labored to establish a new church structure with valid mechanisms of authority and discipline, and they struggled to distinguish themselves from the Ranterism and antinomianism which was then, as now, a popular trend.

Returning to our own day, I mentioned earlier the probability of inconsistencies in a community averse to sharply etched definitions of its belief system. Several examples can be mentioned.

The same Friends who will insistently proclaim all truth to be partial and provisional can also be quite "dogmatic" and "evangelical" when promoting their political views to the world at large, whether the subject be immigration policy, the welfare system, gay marriage, the need for an Equal Right Amendment to the United States Constitution, or the war in the Persian Gulf. Some Friends are willing to heap calumny upon those who disagree with them politically in a way that would put any old fashioned, Bible-thumping preacher of fire and brimstone to shame. I am not out of sympathy with the causes these Friends espouse. I am just noting the frequent contradiction between their professed religious philosophy of seeking without ever finding, and their political attitudes, which could scarcely be described as tentative.

Within Meetings there is clearly a point where non-creedalism breaks down. I have been in Meetings where the use of Christian vocabulary or scriptural allusions, when given in spoken ministry, would surely result in informal eldering at the rise of worship. People who felt themselves to be refugees from the Christian malpractice they experienced in other denominations simply could not

tolerate talk which reminded them of their previous bad experiences. People whose faith expression used some of the same vocabulary employed in other religious communities were effectively silenced by people supposing themselves to be undogmatic, and the official elders of the Meeting did nothing to correct the situation.

I was once a member of a Meeting which faced a problem when a waiter from a nearby restaurant who was a frustrated Shakespearean actor began showing up every First Day. About five minutes after Meeting for Worship began he would rise and deliver a very lengthy Shakespearean monologue in stentorian tones with full emotive colors flying. These renditions would often last for ten or twenty minutes. I was a member of the committee of overseers, which found it impossible to unite on taking any action. The theory seemed to be that since we had announced 11:00 a.m. on First Days as the starting time of worship, anything which occurred within the hour thereafter must be intended by God for our edification. "Why Dan," I was told, "during the 1930's a communist used to come every First Day and lecture to us about communism, but it did not destroy the meeting." I asked how the problem presented by the advocate of communism was ultimately solved in the thirties. "Eventually the he died," I was told.

That was in a suburban Meeting where extreme quirkiness in worship was relatively rare. I later joined a large inner-city Meeting which attracted great numbers of curiosity seekers and spiritual wayfarers. It was not infrequent that one of these visitors would discover the possibility of a captive audience and would rise and carry on at considerable length with an inappropriate message. I have seen it happen in such a case that when an overseer or two sought to intervene there would be an immediate outcry from members of Meeting, usually in the form of messages for the balance of the worship period about authoritarianism and the importance of listening carefully to the misunderstood. Often these follow-up messages, upon an instance of eldering, were tearfully delivered. Eventually someone would exploit the Meeting by giving vent to racist, misogynist, or anti-gay sentiments, when finally it became universally recognized that there was indeed some need for authority and eldering. But the lesson learned seemed to be very short-lived. It was as if the group could comprehend the need for a kind of safety net or protection against the most degraded sorts of intrusions in Meeting for Worship, but could not recognize any role for authority or leadership in nurturing a worship process several notches higher than required by the most elemental sort of decency.

The non-creedal ethos also breaks down around an issue like gay marriage. The non-creedal principle of "thou shalt not rock each other's boat" fails whenever there are two opposite opinions firmly held in the group and one or the other, or both, are not willing simply to be silent or passive observers while the other vision is acted out. Again, I am entirely sympathetic to the cause of gay marriage, but it would be disingenuous to fail to observe that believers in a partial and provisional apprehension of Truth are nevertheless quite prepared to drum opponents of gay marriage out of Meetings if their opposition endures beyond a period deemed reasonable by its proponents. This modern kind of disownment usually comes in the form of exhausting social pressure that causes people with unwanted perspectives to withdraw in discouragement. It is appropriate that when new light is given and the Society of Friends changes those who cannot accommodate to the change can be asked to withdraw. But such determinations should be the result of a disciplined discernment

process, rather than informal pressure. We are proud of how the Religious Society of Friends in America was cleared of slavery 100 years before the American Civil War. But this accomplishment did involve drawing a line which ultimately excluded some Friends who had previously been in good standing but who could not abide the new anti-slavery discipline. So in pointing out how the non-creedal ethos breaks down around issues like gay marriage and slavery, it is not intended that the alternative should be a faith community with no boundaries or with no principles of membership. Rather it is suggested that the reasonableness of boundaries should be frankly acknowledged and should be approached with Quaker disciplines for discernment firmly respected.

There is a sense in which non-creedalism in religion is somewhat like being against big government in politics. The largest government building ever constructed in Washington was recently named after Ronald Reagan, a relentless cutter of taxes and promoter of small government! The truth is that everyone believes in small government when considering issues where they, themselves, want to be "let alone;" but everyone believes in more government when it comes to programs they favor or when it comes to the behavior of other people which they want stopped.

I am not advocating that Friends need to develop an up-to-date creed, a kind of new Richmond Declaration of Faith. I will consider in material below how a Quaker approach to belief content and to faith propositions ought to be different from that of most other Christian Churches. But it is fair to observe that the way our non-creedalism is presently thought about in many Quaker circles really cannot be applied consistently. It bears within it the seeds of its own destruction, and threatens the dissolution of the Religious Society of Friends itself as a serious factor in humankind's future.

All religions which have endured in some way manage to express the Divine Presence in history. For if they did not they could not endure. But each is a particular historical and cultural manifestation of that Presence, often an expression with very conspicuous flaws. No religion can claim to stand outside its own history and its own culture. Each is therefore relative and limited, a particular expression of God's purpose, but not a complete or final one.

One must be cautious in seeking to articulate divine mysteries. By presuming to domesticate the ineffable with our words and concepts we can deprave ourselves. Most sensitive and thoughtful Christians are beginning to understand that through history the Church has presumed to say and to know too much about God. In response, even mainstream Christian theologians now caution that the proper Christian attitude in the face of the divine is silence before a mystery. An agnosticism among Friends, based upon a humble sense of this reality, might lay an appropriate ground-work for a religious culture leading to a future which is better than the past has been. But another kind of agnosticism which might sound superficially the same can be based, rather than on humility, on hubris: on the vain belief that humankind is sufficient unto itself; on the notion that we are capable of working out our own salvation through human contrivance; or, most damaging, on the false and disabling idea that there is no lawfulness in the moral or spiritual realm except that of our own devising. Such an agnosticism which relativizes all truth, and which enjoys seeking just so long as nothing is found, is ultimately cynical and is as demeaning of human dignity as are authoritarian dicta

from ecclesiastical hierarchies. It is, ultimately, to import into religion the worst maladies of secular self-centeredness.

These are admittedly subtle distinctions, but their subtlety cannot be allowed to mask their importance.

A religious community which is a gathering place for refugees from other faiths, and which is attractive to them because it expects nothing of them, may indeed grow. It will, nevertheless, be irrelevant in bringing humankind any closer to the city of God. It will have nothing to say to its youth. It will have no relationship to the future.

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 were shared by most people in this culture, including Quakers. This provided a kind of framework for dialog, 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. There looms the possibility that a globalized culture of the future will have its foci in such commercial centers as New York, London, and Singapore. Unrelated to any of humankind's traditional sources of value and meaning, such a prospective global culture might be rooted in economic arrangements functioning as a law unto themselves, might be materialist in essence, and might be unconstrained by any commonly held view of divine purposes larger than those of the particular individuals whom chance has cast at the fulcrums of power. That is, needless to say, scarcely a happy prospect.

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, that societies can survive in the long run without any common spiritual basis whatsoever, and that all social and political outcomes are acceptable as long as they are determined by unfettered market forces.

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. On questions of identity, authority and community, 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 individual-

ists, 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. But this discernment process does not mean that there are no boundaries to our faith or our religious fellowship, no leadership, and none of the "sameness" which is the glue that holds all communities together.

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 members 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, a key problem like slavery was labored with for nearly 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 forebears practicing. This causes it to wait much, try much, and consult with the Lord, and with his ministers and people, and preserves out of suddenness and inconsiderateness of spirit. For truth is weighty, and will bear trial; and the more it is tried in the balance, the more manifest its nature and ways appear."

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

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

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 ecclesiastical politics through which some people's personal preferences can be made to prevail over other people's personal preferences. There is a clear distinction to be made between an irascibility born of a stubborn, ego-centered insistence upon one's own independence, and a sacrificial fortitude in witnessing to a new pattern of life which offers the possibility of salvation for the generality of humanity. We must, when any spiritual question arises, seek both individually and corporately to attune ourselves to a Universal Order and a Universal Good, to the will of the Creator.

The flaw of much traditional religion has been 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 compete Truth. For Friends, our faith 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 toward scripture and ecclesiastical authority, and with its emphasis on living spiritual experience, it is prepared to respond to this motion of the cosmic dance. We are admittedly 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 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. We will probably always experience pain and difficulty in practicing Quaker discernment to determine 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. Anarchy and formlessness, a religion in which everyone does his or her own thing, is not a legitimate way out of this struggle. But we should not despair, for one of the unambiguous messages of scripture is that God frequently speaks to us in the midst of our turmoils, stresses and troubles. We must never give up the hope of receiving a message which unites.

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 embedded attitudes, that they can be expected to negotiate about them amicably, or trust them to an election. It seems to me that this is one of the most riveting aspects of the matter to contemplate. 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 therefore 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 and the twenty-first century is to be solved by drawing entire populations into the Religious Society of Friends. Nor am I suggesting that Quakers, as members of a minority pacifist sect, should expect to function as "peace-makers," 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 for a way of life capable of sustaining humankind's

future. 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.

What is suggested is that the conscientious practice of our discernment process, of our search for unity, within the Religious Society of Friends, can result in Friends enacting a vision which 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. Note that this cannot be a formless way of life which stands for nothing. But imbued with form, character, and Truth, Quaker example has led the way 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 itself, and that we cease importing into the life of the Religious Society of Friends the impatience, the polarization, and the anarchic expressive individualism which is 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 try 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 brokeness and fragmentation with reconciliation, to grow, to change, to love, to know Truth, to live in peace and to build justice. But we must also know that formlessness and anarchy are not answers; we must affirm the need for Truth and for unity based on authentic Quaker discernment.

The Quakerism of the future will have familiar characteristics, but with God's help these will be sustained and upbuilt by a community of members committed to a common vision of the Religious Society and its mission within the larger community of faith and the larger human community, and less concerned about importing into the Society of Friends the expressive individualism of post-modern secular culture. Such a Quakerism will be recognizable by:

1) **Discernment and Unity**. The conscientious practice of a discernment process in accordance with the principles outlined by Isaac Penington and other early Friends. This should support the collective apprehension of a continuing revelation, the revelation of a vision for human life capable of sustaining the next phase of human culture, which will be a globalized human culture.

2) **Christianity**. The special Quaker understanding of the Christianity of Jesus and the Apostles will show a way to other Christians seeking to participate reasonably in a global community characterized by religious pluralism. As Jesus read the signs of his times, Friends will read the signs of theirs. Friends will know that people the world over, in order to have an adequate grasp of God's work in human history, must know of the Christ event in Galilee two thousand years ago. But they will also know that all the world's great religious traditions are God's ways of working among Her people; the new Christianity will not be imperialist, but rather will be enthusiastically respectful of other spiritual traditions. Scripture will be understood in a way which frees it of the encumbrances of past times which are embedded in the text, and of the encumbrances of present times embedded in our own psyches.

3) **Courage and Humility**. Friends will embody a sophisticated grasp of the paradox that our faith can be true enough to be worth our very lives, and yet always provisional enough that we cannot neglect appreciating the light revealed by other spiritual paths.

4) **Social Activism**. A constant and conscientious attempt to translate our faith into action as Friends exercise their citizenship in the global culture coming to birth, and contribute creatively in the fashioning and reforming of its social and economic structures.

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 human kind forever as Her gift. The scriptures tell us 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, and closer to meaningful social transformation as a result of searching dialog. Dialog in this deep sense consists of speaking the Truth as we understand it and listening to others as they speak from their understanding.

When this dialog 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.

As 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 where future generations can make their home.

Daniel A. Seeger
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