GATHERED FOR GREATNESS?

Friends in the Modern World

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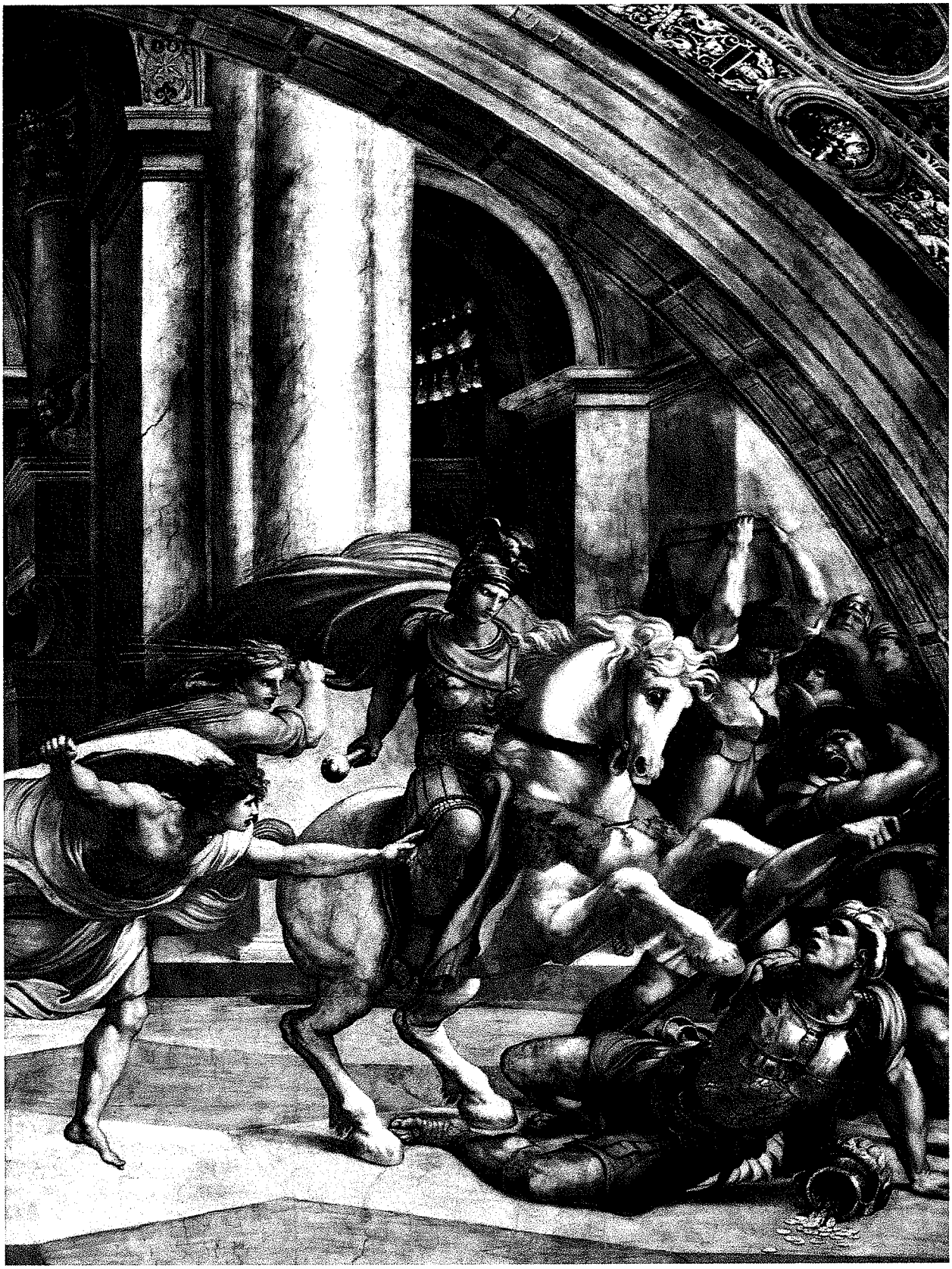

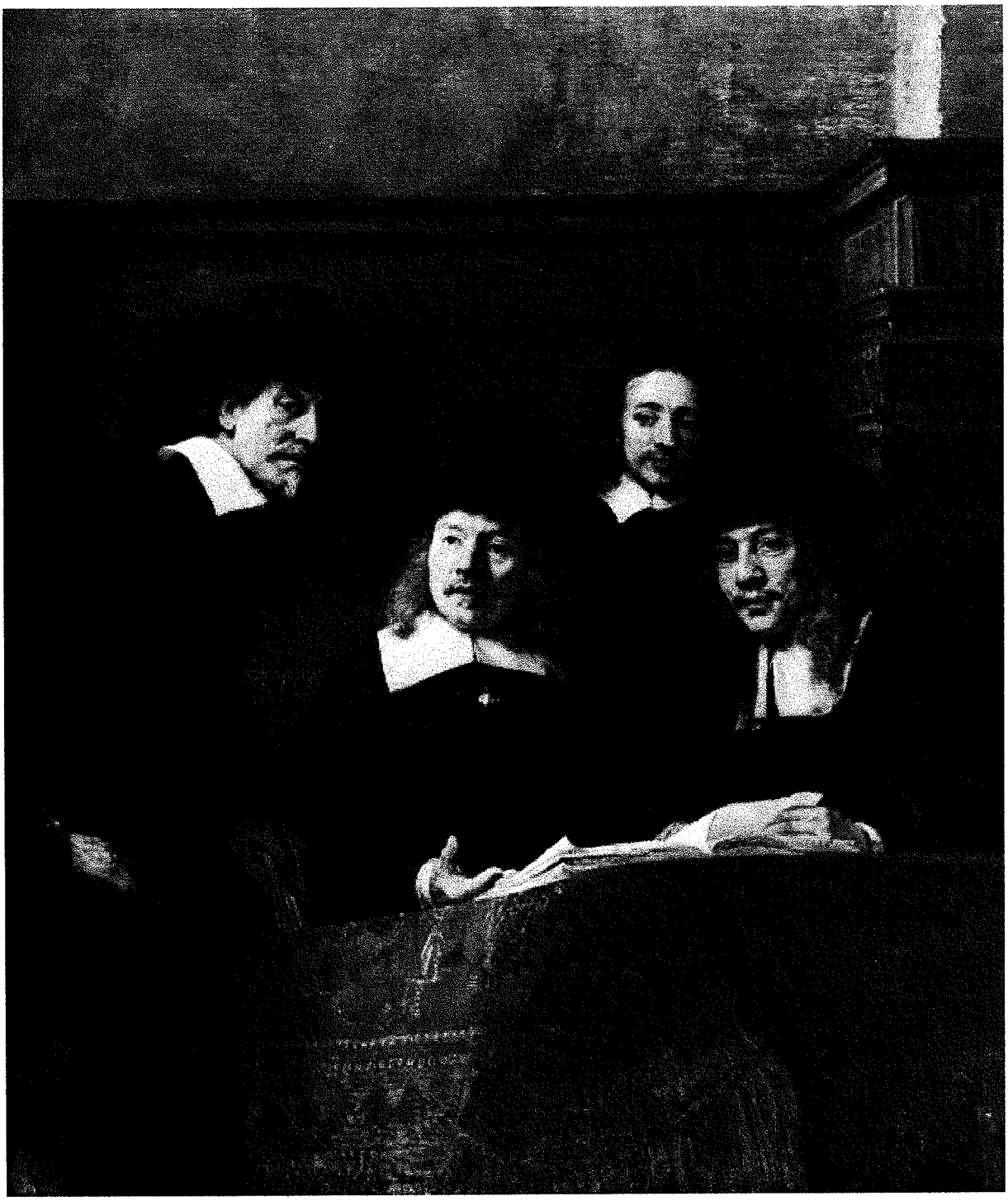


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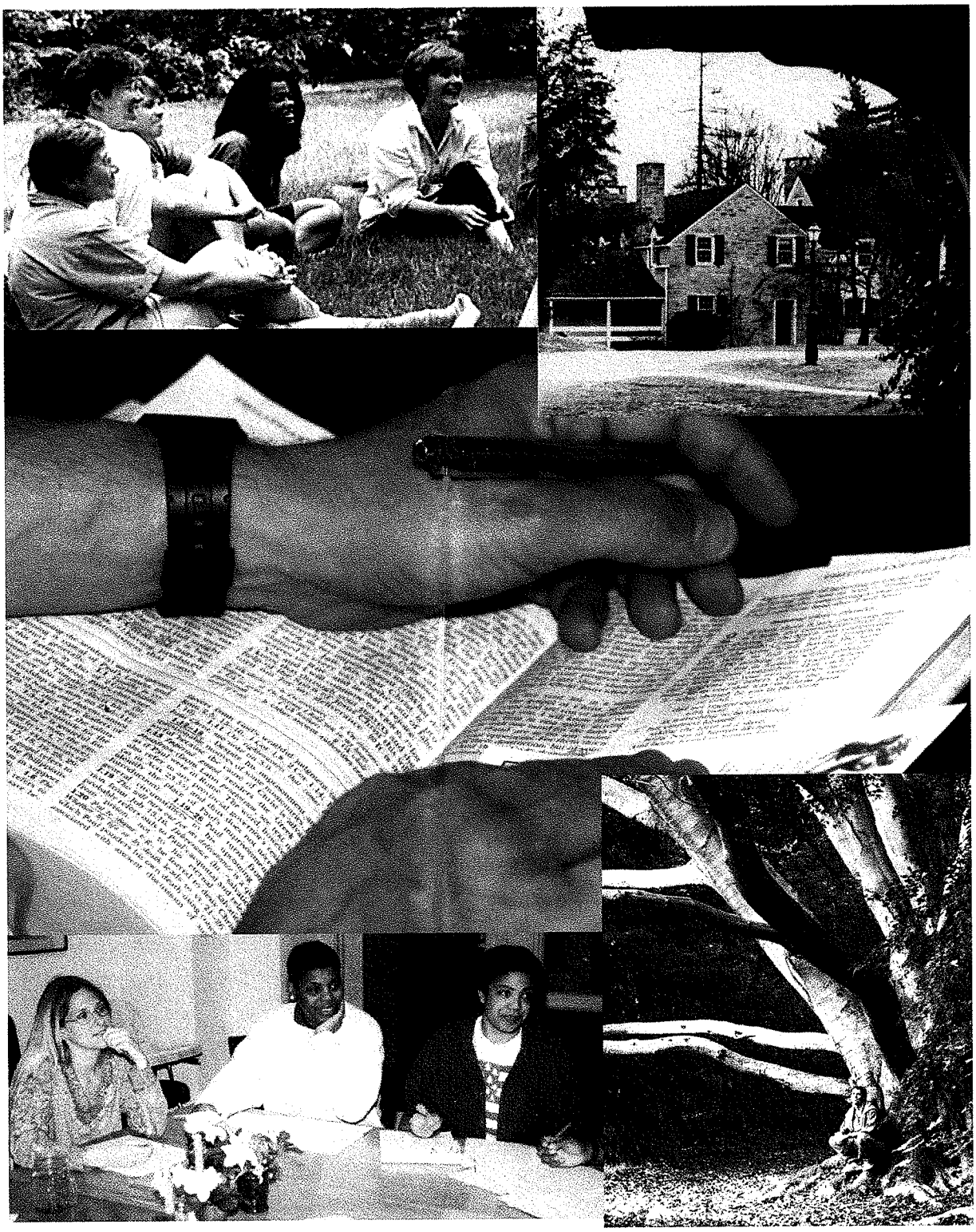

". . .and the Lord let me see a-top of the hill in what places he had a great people to be gathered."

George Fox, a founder of the Religious Society of Friends,
describing his experience on Pendle Hill in 1652

George Fox, on Pendle Hill in England, had a vision of "a great *people* to be gathered." The spiritual quest is not only a search for the individual soul's relationship to God. It also requires us to answer the question: "What does the Lord require of us *as a people?"* Do Friends as a community have a historic task? Given the current state of human affairs, what would a Spirit-led people do, what way of life would they adopt in order to address the needs of their fellow human beings now and in the future? Can we as a people be patterns and examples for a culture which would support the next phase of human development? And if we are meant to have a significant role or task, are we gathered together enough to do it? And do we have the greatness of soul required?

refer to charts

Here we are ~~at the end of the twentieth century~~, at the dawn of a new millennium in the calendar of Christian culture. Let us take stock. For if we are to answer the question "What are we called to do?" the answer must obviously arrive out of some sense of the state of affairs in which we find ourselves. As Jesus read the signs of his times, we must read the signs of ours.

day 2

In the time available to us I want to try to accomplish two things. I want to try to read the signs of our times and to ask if Quakerism has a distinctive contribution to make (I will tell you in advance that I strongly believe we do), and then I want to reflect on Pendle Hill's role in enabling Quakers to realize their God-given vocation.

It is a little difficult for me to know where to begin the fresco I want to paint for you, but let us start with the chimpanzees.

Chimpanzees are apparently our closest living relatives in the animal kingdom. This has long been implied from the evolutionary evidence, incomplete as it is. But apparently the theory of our relatedness to chimpanzees has been given additional force by new methods of DNA analysis. At any rate, like almost all other primates, including humans, chimpanzees live in groups, and their doing so is facilitated by inherent dispositions to assertiveness and deference that support a social life in which

each knows his or her place, and in which one individual tends to lead and the others to follow. Jane Goodall, the famous researcher of chimpanzee societies, in addition to observing this social organization, also discovered that chimpanzees eat meat and make tools. Other observers have noted that chimpanzees like to watch television, their favorite programs being *National Geographic* specials about chimpanzees. Significantly, Jane Goodall found that although they are helpful, generous, and even loving with members of their own group, chimpanzees behave murderously towards members of other groups. They are intensely territorial, and regularly patrol the boundaries of their area, seeking not only to keep others out, but to expand their domains at others' expense. They are not averse to the practice of something akin to ethnic cleansing, if you will. She has observed members of one group kill members of another group, and has written that chimpanzees share with humans "an unusually hostile and violently aggressive attitude toward non-group individuals." Like ourselves, then, chimpanzees have not one kind of politics, but two: the politics of comradeship within groups, and the politics of hostility between groups.

Now we human beings are in some respects like our chimpanzee relatives, and in some respects unlike them. Although according to the DNA evidence, our genetic code differs from theirs by a mere 1.5 to 2 percent, that two percent perhaps contains much of paramount significance. In particular, the facility for language allows a quantum leap in the character of group life, supporting the development of culture from which so much else flows. Human beings, rather than merely living together in clan groupings, actually work together towards common ends. We learned to build canals for irrigation, to mine and to smelt metal for tools, to write, and to develop an agricultural surplus allowing a specialization of labor into non-food producing activities, including the building of cathedrals and skyscrapers, the study of medicine, and the sending of rockets to the Moon. It is not that groups can do these things better than individuals can, it is that an individual, by himself, cannot do them at all. Culture, a product of spiraling interactivity, dwarfs the sum of what all the members of the society can contribute individually. Groups can transcend time, creating cultures that endure through generations and even ages. Involving as it does a complex organization of society, civilization requires a coherent, shared outlook, an ideal held in common by those who belong to the same society, a shared vision almost always expressed in a foundational set of religious beliefs which are given expression in sculpture, painting, music, architecture, literature, philosophy, and other manifestations of the human spirit. Civilizations and the religions at their core in some sense answer the question of how human beings should conduct their lives, what goals they should pursue, and how human beings themselves can become better.

Sadly, it seems, civilizations also involve armies and organized warfare. The innate tendencies that allowed human beings to progress, that is the loyalty of individuals to their group, which enabled people to pool resources of mind, muscle and imagination and to extend dominion, did not abolish a feeling of alienation from members of other groups. Indeed, it could perhaps be argued that different cultures, by their creating an overlay of distinctiveness beyond mere blood relationship and clan ties, exaggerated innate tendencies to regard non-group members as "alien" and "other." This was less of a problem when the earth was sparsely settled and when different groups encountered each other only occasionally. As population grew intergroup battling became more and more costly, especially since the technologies of civilization itself made it possible to wreak havoc on one's

enemies with ever more effectiveness and efficiency. Human aspirations turned naturally to a search for unity and peace.

The search for unity and peace tended to take either one of two forms. One was, quite simply, conquest. Societies sought security by conquering their neighbors, pacifying them, and incorporating them into their own social and civilizing system. We are non-violent Quakers, and the idea of conquest turns us off. We are apt to dismiss these enterprises as the product of a degraded humanity motivated by plunder and greed. It is true that greed cannot be ruled out of the equation. But Alexander the Great, for example, was tutored by Aristotle and sought the spread of culture and law. His efforts, dazzling in their heyday, were short lived. But he became a model for the Roman Caesars. Suleyman the Magnificent, while conquering a vast area for the Ottoman Turks, brought with him scholars and architects and lawyers to uplift life in the conquered territories. While a civilizing intent is not very conspicuous in Genghis Khan, his grandson, Kublai Kahn, who greatly expanded the Mongol Empire, definitely had ambitions of a lofty sort, akin to those of Alexander, the Roman Caesars, and Suleyman.

The other avenue of search for unity and peace was not rooted in arms. Prophets and sages arose – Lao-tzu, Zoroaster, the Buddha, Moses, Confucius, Plato, Jesus, and others – each advancing a spiritual vision of a way of life intended for universal applicability, a way of life to which all people could adhere, a way of life which counseled compassion and loving-kindness by each person for all others regardless of clan, culture or ethnicity. These religious visions often succeeded in orienting and defining entire civilizations, enabling countless millions of people to relate to each other so that life flowed along in predictable and natural seeming patterns which almost everyone could regard as appropriate and good. The influences on human history of the founders of the great religions have endured over the ages in a way that far exceeds the impact of even the most successful generals and statesmen.

It is estimated that at present fully one sixth of the world's people live according to one or another variety of Buddhist teaching, that one seventh of the world's people are Islamic, and that one third are Christian. But the totally universalizing and unifying aspirations of these religious cultures were never fully realized by any one of them. Although each succeeded in prevailing over significant segments of the human population, they seemed impervious to each other, and their expansion was stymied by the existence of the others. Centuries of Christian evangelism, for example, have not made much of a dent in the Hindu or Islamic worlds. Moreover, to the extent that these religious cultures did encounter each other they, too, tended to become embroiled in a sort of religious warfare which would merit the disdain of any civilized deity.

But the drive for unification and pacification continued on the military level until a global unity was reached, with the European branch of human civilization at the center and in charge. Students of European colonialism estimate that by 1914 over eighty-four percent of the world's land area was dominated by Europeans. This hegemony has subsequently collapsed, as we know. The collapse began with disastrous wars and conflicts among the Europeans themselves, starting with the First World War, followed by the Russian Revolution and the Second World War. These in turn were

followed by the successful struggle for the independence of India led by Gandhi, and then by many other successful struggles and wars for the liberation of subject peoples. But oddly, although the global hegemony of the Europeans has been dissolved on the political level, the economic system that went along with their empires seems to have survived intact, in fact developing even further. Somehow the same cast of characters remains in charge, except that the Americans and the Japanese are now included in the power elite, and the same populations as before are the ones being subjected and exploited.

In order fully to understand in a general way the human condition of today and the relevance of Quaker values and testimonies to it, it is necessary to bring into view two more developments, one which originates in prehistory, and one which occurred at the close of the Middle Ages in Europe.

Seven thousand years ago there occurred events which are at the root of the most baffling aspects of the situation we now face. In a series of strokes by anonymous intellectual geniuses it was discovered that certain stones on the earth's surface did not chip well for tools, but were malleable. Then it was discovered that when heated these stones became pliable, and were eventually liquified if the temperature was raised to a high enough degree. Next it was discovered that metals were found not only in a pure state but also as constituent elements of ores, and that, once again, through heat, the metal could be extracted from the ores. Finally, it was discovered that seemingly abundant supplies of ores were located underground, and could be obtained by mining. These discoveries were made between 7,000 and 2,800 years ago in different parts of the world, when the various ages of metallurgy began.

We now face two profound sets of consequences which result from these astounding discoveries. One we know as the ecological crisis. The age of metallurgy started a process of extracting non-renewable resources from the earth, resources which we now know face exhaustion. The age of metallurgy also introduced into human culture smelting and manufacturing processes which degrade the environment. Neither of these consequences – the exhaustion of the earth's resources and the degradation of the biosphere – became apparent as long as humankind's efforts remained small in scale; now these consequences are quite glaring and totally alarming.

But the second series of consequences of these astonishing technical discoveries made 7,000 years ago were social consequences. Before the age of metallurgy, human beings, for the most part, were "Jills-and-Jacks-of-all-trades," largely responsible for and able to develop the wide range of skills necessary to care for themselves and their families. While an exchange of goods was practiced, this tended to be on a small scale and not essential to survival. But metallurgy ushered in a radical division of labor. The smiths and miners became the first specialists. Each had to devote the whole of his available working time to his craft, instead of continuing to be a Jack-of-all-trades, as the Paleolithic hunter and the Neolithic husbandman had been. Moreover, as mines developed there was a need for primitive engineers to construct and to maintain them, for scribes and accountants to keep track of transactions, and for specialized merchants and tradespeople to distribute the product of the mining effort. The development of irrigation systems, and the growth of cities which the resulting agricultural surplus allowed, required a similar set of functions and the division of labor. Here arose

a significant ethical problem. On what principle is the total product of society to be distributed among the various classes of producers? Who gets what, how, why, and when? The total product is the fruit of the cooperative work of many people, but their respective contributions are unequal in effectiveness and value. Moreover, the finite natural resources utilized are the common inheritance of all of humanity. How can an allocation of shares be made which will be recognized by all parties as being just? After 7,000 years this fundamental ethical question has yet to be solved satisfactorily.

Developments in the fields of metallurgy, agriculture, commerce, empire-building and religion all tended to occur independently in several different parts of the world in roughly the same periods of time. But this parallelism or balance among the world's major cultures ended as a result of a dramatic synthesis of science, technology, industry and commerce which occurred in the European branch of human civilization, and which allowed it to propel itself to the dominance on the world stage which I have already described. Therefore, in order to understand the situation facing the world's people today it is necessary to understand a peculiarity of this European perspective which now tends to prevail everywhere, a peculiarity which took root at the close of the Middle Ages.

In spite of the lofty teaching and example of Christianity's founder, Jesus of Nazareth, the ethos of compassion, peace and unity never fully took hold among the peoples who inherited and carried on the Christian tradition in the wake of the collapse of the Roman Empire. Although beset by enemies from without, from the Visigoths who sacked Rome in A. D. 410, to the raiding of Vienna by the Turks in A. D. 1683, the Europeans were also prone to shed blood profusely in quarrels among themselves, and as the Middle Ages came to a close, this bloody fratricide involved quarrels over Christianity itself. The Hundred Years War, resolved in part by the military accomplishment of Joan of Arc, and the Thirty Years War, involving Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists, were incredibly destructive and traumatic. As the Frenchman Francois de le Noue observed at the time, "It was our wars of religion which made us forget our religion." In putting an end to these conflicts at the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 Europeans vowed never to war over religion again, although, unfortunately, they did not give up warfare in general.

This "forgetting of our religion" took on an even profounder import then Francois de la Noue supposed. Revulsion at the wars of religion, and the tendency of religious institutions to ally themselves with outmoded and despotic monarchies, made it seem to people of good will 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 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.

Rene Descartes' intellectual path was indicative of the direction in which a certain distinctive kind of European thought was moving. He was the proponent of radical doubt, systematizing skepticism. Michel de Montaigne was another such exemplar of doubt. Seeing the dangers and errors to which passionate beliefs can lead, such philosophers became exponents of moderation. An enlightened self-interest, a practical turn of mind, a disposition to base judgements only on facts and hard evidence,

skepticism in thought, and moderation in action were the characteristics of mind toward which European culture reached as it emerged from long centuries of feudalism. This distaste for passionate belief which first arose in response to the wars of religion has been reinforced in our own time by revulsion at wars of ideology. To many people of a certain kind of modern deconstructionist frame of mind, certainty itself, certainty of any kind, has come to seem the enemy of human freedom and progress.

So here is the paradox. Involving as it does a complex organization of society, civilization requires a coherent, shared outlook, an ideal held in common by those who belong to the same community. Yet today, while modern industrial society is uniting people through commerce and technology in external ways, the spiritual basis for cohesion is evaporating. From the beginning of the industrial revolution it has been apparent that our society has been eroding, coasting along on a constantly dwindling legacy from Christianity. Alexis de Tocqueville observed that democracy breeds individualism, a word he used to mean a selfish and exclusive withdrawal into our personal concerns and a lack of care for the interests of others or for the community as a whole. On the spiritual level Americans must develop their own faith individually, finding for themselves the meaning of existence, one by one. So while, on a technological level, modern society brings people together, on another level it sends them apart, driving them away in search of certainties an open society cannot provide.

As the twentieth century draws to an end we see emerging a global system of technological development and economic growth in which people are purposefully moving on and moving ahead. Yet there is no undergirding body of spiritual ideas like those which have sustained all previous cultures and which would allow people to be in reasonable unity about where they should be going in this moving on and moving ahead. Nor can they assess what activity is fair or unfair, nor know how to balance costs and benefits in a moral sense. And there remains the age-old unresolved dilemma about distributive justice. The free play of market forces can provide needed discipline; it can also produce chaos and many victims. Socialism and communism were invented because unbridled capitalism can be very offensive. Because communism has failed it does not necessarily follow that capitalism is a success.

Counterpoised against the rationalist, secularized, commercial and technological global culture, with its unfeeling reliance on market processes, there are forces of disintegration, nationalism, separatism, ethnic cleansing, secession, and religious and ideological factionalism. Modern nationalisms encourage people to secede from their respective countries to form independent states of their own; such nationalisms often demand the right to expel from their own state all groups other than themselves. It is now clear that this is a pattern and not a few isolated instances. Each people would rule itself within its own territory; each would be ethnically pure. The increasing standardization of what people eat and wear and what entertains them belies much deeper conflicts. Some of these conflicts seem to be little more than a continuation of the ages-old and instinctive hostility to those outside one's own group, a pattern that recurs throughout human history and all the way back to the ancestors we share with the chimpanzees. But some of these conflicts are also conscious and determined revolts against modernity itself. Leaders of ancient Rome referred to barbarians at the gates. Today, there are no gates or frontiers in a global culture. Instead we have a thousand Trojan

horses within the gates. They are filled with rebels, whom, rather than label barbarians, we now designate as terrorists.

This, then, is what the 21st century will be all about: the drama of humankind's pulling together and pulling apart at the same time, and the search for a spiritual vision which can infuse the globalized secularized culture of commerce and technology with justice, with ecological sensitivity, and with a meaning and purpose beyond itself.

Quakerism can speak powerfully to this contemporary dilemma, a dilemma stemming, on the one hand, from disillusionment with the rigidity, excesses and false pretensions of traditional religion, and, on the other, with the failures of the rationalistic and scientific culture which has succeeded the age of faith.

First, Quakerism is clear that the meaning of our existence lies in something outside of ourselves, in something to which we owe loyalty and gratitude, in a principle of Truth which seeks to make itself known to us, in a principle of Goodness to which we can resonate in the way we live. Quakerism does not look for ultimate Truth in the purely rational or human sphere, but seeks to discern the will of God.

At the same time Quakerism avoids the flaw of much traditional religion, which has tended to assume that our grasp of the foundational truths by which we must live 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, and religious people see in the faith of others some sort of satanic rivalry to their own beliefs. It is a misconception which leads to a kind of spiritual imperialism based on a sense of owning the complete truth.

For Friends, our faith is not akin to clinging to a shrine; rather it is an endless pilgrimage of the heart. We know that our awareness of God's Truth is always beyond our secure apprehension; yet we are committed to seeking after it diligently, and then to living faithfully according to the measure of Truth given to us. So our faith pilgrimage involves motion, but it is orderly motion; it is not chaotic, random, or discontinuous. In other words, this motion towards Truth is like a dance. The great breakthrough that Quakerism represents is that, with our special attitude toward scripture and ecclesiastical authority, and with our emphasis on living spiritual experience, we are prepared to participate in the motion of the cosmic dance.

Key to all this is the Quaker discernment process, the testing of all important issues of faith in a worshipful deliberation participated in by all members earnestly seeking, not a human consensus, but the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is a highly disciplined process and requires much patience. It is the practice of a corporate mysticism through which the prophetic function acts collectively. Past experience has proven that out of this discernment process Friends can be empowered to enact a vision which will be a compelling example to others. Friends insights and practices in education, in he 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. By continuing to open ourselves to divine guidance and by practicing our corporate discernment process patiently and conscientiously, I believe we will find that much more will be given to us; that we will be able to contribute much more to the human family's search for the universal and eternal things upon which all right living and true peace is based.

There are three other aspects, at least, of Quaker experience and practice which also have enormous relevance to the future: our practice of Christian universalism, our peace testimony; and our testimony of simplicity.

While there is a growing spiritual crisis which must be addressed by people of faith everywhere, it cannot helpfully be addressed by religious people whose only vision is to impose their particular scheme on everyone else. Fundamentalism and fanaticism, while always representing a distortion of Truth, are, under current conditions, extremely dysfunctional. It is of no use talking about loving our neighbor while at the same time dismissing as inferior or mistaken his most cherished possession, his religious faith. Indeed, since it is the transforming power of religious faith which offers the only hope for a way out of our present impasse, a significant aspect of the great task before us is to come increasingly to discover how the world's faiths can nourish each other and how all people of faith can collaborate with respect to the challenges we must face together.

Unprogrammed Friends have, for the most part, rejected the untenable proposition that Christianity is superior to all the other world faiths, and that all humanity is destined to be Christianized.

Quakerism's extraordinary gift lies precisely in its capacity to be both Christian and universalist. As Friends we must continue to seek to heal any overt or covert power struggles among religious communities. We must help people of faith to see that the world will be enriched if people of different spiritual traditions develop an active sympathy with each other, and a willingness to learn from those on a different spiritual path. Quakers must continue to cultivate a magnanimous spirit, helping to build dialogue and rapport among the different religious communities of the earth. We are unique among Christian communities in our capacity to contribute in this way to the building of the new age which is struggling to come to birth.

Regarding the peace testimony, it is true that the threat of nuclear omnicide, of a killing off of everyone and everything in one reckless moment, seems to have receded. Yet our Quaker peace testimony remains highly relevant to the human prospect. For surely in terms of actual human suffering, the cost of war and of violence is as great and as tragic today as it has ever been. Moreover, as the globe seems to shrink, as human populations multiply, and as advanced scientific, technological, and economic systems have the effect of increasing the volume and variety of the interactions which occur among the various peoples of the world, it becomes more and more clear that conflicts among groups are likely to escalate. This will occur much the way aggression becomes more pronounced among people or animals confined to a small space than it does when there is more room. This brings the work of many Friends in the fields of conflict resolution, mediation, and alternatives to violence into sharp focus and increasing relevance. A renewed way of life for the

future must be based upon a commitment to conciliation, a commitment to upbuilding a sense of charity and unity in the human family.

Finally, regarding simplicity, the spirituality of the future will reject a commercialism based totally on the unleashing and manipulation of egoistic and selfish desires. It will encourage a profound sense of the blessedness of all that is perfectly ordinary. It will advance a renewed sense of the wonder, the mystery and the miracle of life just as it is given to us. It will refuse to see the individual, conceived independently of social relationships, as the primary human reality, an individual who is expected to advance interests of his own in competition with others, interests which are determined essentially by the passions. Integrity will count more than worldly ambition. There will be a respect for limits, a healthy skepticism about unending material progress, and a realization that everything has its price. In short, the spirituality of the future will be rooted in something very akin to what Friends know as the testimony of simplicity.

What is Pendle Hill's role in helping to gather a people and prepare them for greatness?

If we believe that in Quakerism there is something of value for humankind, it follows that one of the tasks of Pendle Hill is to preserve, to teach, and to ensure the continued availability of the gathered wisdom of our spiritual community, and to inspire love and enthusiasm for this wisdom. Our Quaker heritage holds up for us a vision of human life expressing the best of human possibilities, showing us their nobility and attractiveness, drawing us to them. Pendle Hill's work reflects the truth that at least part of every person's growth on the spiritual path arises from a humble willingness to listen to, and profit by, the lessons from the past. So in retreats, workshops, and courses lasting anywhere from two days, to a week, to ten weeks, Pendle Hill offers opportunities to study the Bible and Quaker history, Quaker faith and testimonies, and Quaker practice, and to live in a community committed to enacting Quakerism in a daily life focused on worship, work, and study. We also practice and teach various crafts as contemplative disciplines.

But Pendle Hill cannot be concerned only with lessons from the past. For we cannot blindly or mechanically mimic the past. Conditions change, either slowly or cataclysmically. Newly discovered shortcomings of social and religious institutions come into view as awareness deepens. The religious sensibility constantly seeks an enlargement of the sustaining vision and a greater perfection in the expression it is given in institutions and practices.

I hastily summarized the contemporary world as torn between the dynamics of pulling apart and pulling together. It is also suffering from perplexities following upon the attempt to substitute reason and science for revealed religion. Imbedded within this historical circumstance are many profound quandaries which require deep prayer and careful pondering. So Pendle Hill's ministry must be focused on these quandaries as well. We must never fall into the trap of believing that to drag religion from the depths of the individual human heart into an encounter with the groanings and sufferings of the world is to contaminate it. Friends need prayerfully to seek a way forward to a future that will be different from the past. Our Forum Program is intended to perform the office of providing an opportunity for a wide spectrum of Friends to participate in a search for Guidance and

vision. Pendle Hill is by no means some sort of think tank instructing Friends about their role in a future world. But we hope to be a devotional meeting place where Friends can gather in an atmosphere of prayer and worship, and where they can conduct dialogues with honesty and intellectual rigor and integrity. Pendle Hill is a space where people concerned about the Religious Society of Friends and its ministry to the human condition can come for sharing, can speak the truth as they understand it, and can listen creatively as others speak the truth as they understand it. When love performs these two offices – speaking and listening – education and community happen, and the Holy Spirit can show the way forward.

Shall we ever transform the pandemonium we know as human society into a community of saints? Do all the horrors and humiliations of the twentieth century leave us with any basis for hope? Will this earthly city ever resemble the City of God?

Of course, here at the end of the twentieth century, we cannot know the future. We cannot tell what Caesar in his tent might cast his eyes pensively over outspread maps, striving that civilization might not sink, its great battle lost. We do not know what Michelangelo will recline on a scaffold, his hand and brush going to and fro, making no more noise than the mice, but eventually unveiling a compelling vision. We cannot tell what city, what pillared galleries, what lofty steel towers, what theaters, what windows of many-colored glass, and what monuments might be given shape. We do not know what poets and philosophers may arise to lead a revolt against accepted things in favor of truth.

But we do know that people will never create a family, a community, a nation, or a global society which exceeds in wisdom and goodness the wisdom and goodness they have within their own hearts. Those who hunger and thirst for justice, who are merciful, who are pure of heart, who are peacemakers, who are gentle, bring the City of God into sight. So in Quakerism's search for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in its peace testimony, in its universalist Christianity, and in its testimony of simplicity we find a way of life worthy of our profoundest enthusiasm. If we follow it faithfully and fully we can become a gathered people and a great people, a people whose way of life is prophecy enacted, a people who will prepare a place where future generations can make their home.

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