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Thomas F. Head

George Fox University, thead@georgefox.edu

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THOMAS F. HEAD

Everyday Eschatology: The Witness of Quaker Simplicity

Things are not all so comprehensible and expressible as one would mostly have us believe; most events are inexpressible, taking place in a realm which no word has ever entered¹

Rainer Maria Rilke

The healthy reserve with which Friends translate the wonders of life into concepts and words is an attractive characteristic. The silence in which Quaker worship is set relaxes dependence upon verbalization. Attentive waiting in a spirit of expectancy reflects the belief that consciousness must be fixed on more than the expressible if we are to hear the word of the Lord. And in dealing with business matters Friends shy away from propositions subject to majority rulings. Instead there is a search for "the sense of the meeting." When unity emerges it often consists of something that was not entirely comprehensible prior to the experience of being gathered in openness and obedience.

Meetings for worship and business offer a pattern for daily living. We find direction and wholeness when living worshipfully. We find hope in a new creation that reaches beyond our own doing. We discover words and actions unfolding from the "realm which no word has ever entered," and such events bring great meaning and beauty to our lives. This paper is based on the idea that we can learn something about Quaker eschatology by reflecting upon these words and actions. In particular, I will suggest that simplicity—a trait so important to Friends—has eschatological significance. Simple living flows out of religious experience and conveys meanings that can be read and understood.

"Simplicity" in this sense is not a rigid scheme of behavior but a characteristic or quality of words and deeds, and it is best viewed as a symptom or by-product rather than as a position or goal. This "fruit of holy obedience"² constitutes a meaningful response to materialism and busyness and takes on ever greater significance in a world that is increasingly conscious of social and ecological interdependence. The contemporary search for sensible models of living has drawn much from the Quaker tradition of simplicity. Still it is necessary to warn that there is always the subtle danger of

elevating the fruit itself, and thus being caught up in idolizing simplicity. Simplicity is neither the source nor the goal of meaningful living, but it is a distinguishing trait to which we can point.

Simplicity is one small, but nonetheless important, part of the Quaker experience, and I believe that this quality of simplicity is an element to be included somewhere in that vision Dean Freiday has called "our common Quakerhood."³ This quality is distinctively, though certainly not exclusively, Quaker. It is neither doctrinally rigid nor nebulously sentimental. And it points simultaneously to both ethical practice and inner enlightenment. It embodies an eschatological commentary because the convergence of the present and the hoped-for future are affirmed in simple living, which allows and fosters an end to the false barriers between the present and the transformed future. By it we are freed to discover and experience the overpowering sacredness of life.

An entire eschatological theology is not being attempted here on the flimsy foundation of one quality, but simplicity reflects our eschatology and it is worthy of some consideration in that context. Simplicity suggests a presence that reaches beyond the visible. It acknowledges that "Most events are inexpressible" in terms of human wisdom, and it rejects the images of a society with prepackaged notions of truth, beauty, and well-being. Rather than seeing creation as merely finite and God as unapproachably infinite (or nonexistent), Quaker simplicity witnesses to the role of the inward Christ as restorer of the fundamental unity between God and man. Although we report this belief by the way we live, this paper does not intend to glorify the way in which we live but rather to look at Quaker simplicity as one acknowledgment of the mysterious and wondrous events that are hidden in the future.

A Sense of Miracle

A spiritual union between God and humankind depends partly on a willingness and ability to experience the miraculous. Both the early Christian church and early Friends displayed such a propensity. The Christian tree that sprouted from the perception of a miracle was not so much one solid oak as an aspen grove with clumps of separate trees growing from a common root. One of these clumps, the Religious Society of Friends, would not have emerged and survived to this day if it were not for the event that shook the world of a few ordinary, first century people. A philosophy alone would not have sustained itself. It required a religious experience, a sense of miracle, that has lived and continues to live. Thomas Kelly eloquently testified to such miraculousness:

It is an overwhelming experience to fall into the hands of the living God, to be invaded to the depths of one's being by His presence, to be, without warning, wholly uprooted from all earth-born securities and assurances, and to be blown by a tempest of unbelievable power which leaves one's old proud self utterly, utterly defenseless⁴

This sort of inner experience forms the core of all that we do as Friends. This is no "cheap thrills" ecstasy, but a plain and straightforward acknowledgment of the Spirit that overwhelms us and thrusts us into a new consciousness.

It is this same sense of miracle that comes through in Paul's vision of our earthly end: "the last enemy, death, will be abolished . . . God will be all in all."⁵ We can scarcely comprehend such an event, yet without such hints of miracle it is not likely that we would even begin to speak of eschatology or expect realms beyond our immediately visible realism. Such a sense of miracle sometimes seems particularly unapproachable in this scientific age. As empiricism supplants a religious interpretation of history, we lose touch with all but the observable. We feel alone and without meaning. We sense our finiteness, but we are blocked by the very structure of our thought from reaching out to "touch" what is beyond the finite. Materialism and pseudoscientific reductionism leave us so preoccupied with counting, classifying, and manipulating possessions and experiences that we lose our sense of the reality beyond our immediate and tangible sphere of being. A false sense of knowledge and control deadens our awareness, and we are left without a sense of miracle and without a capacity to touch and to be touched by the divine.

Many questions arise in the face of this dullness: How is a sense of miracle restored? How do we develop the openness, the sensitivity, the predisposition to experience the miraculous? How do we ready ourselves to see beyond the separateness of personalities and things, of categorizing and measuring? What are the preconditions for God to be all in all?

If we do indeed take part in history, then it becomes meaningful to speak of preconditions and readiness. The Lord of history does not act alone; we too shape the path of creation. Perhaps here I can best represent my feelings symbolically. I prize the image of dance, not a disco or foxtrot but a freely structured, visually lyrical encounter . . . sometimes floating, sometimes soaring, sometimes curled in rest . . . sometimes expectant, sometimes startled . . . always awed by touching, harmony, and fullness. Certainly a vital spirituality is something like this. Spiritual beings are

not involuntary automatons; we are responsive and diverse personalities. We seek and we find. We learn the spiritual dance slowly, unevenly, and only when we choose. Only when we marvel at life are we ready for an encounter of wholeness.

I cannot help but think that simplicity relates to these preconditions, to the rudimentary movements of the eternal dance. The way we provide for food, clothing, and shelter; the way we distribute income, collect taxes, control money, and spend public funds; the way we structure the use of time; the way we express our feelings and beliefs—these all condition our spirits and reflect our state of being. We cannot, as the reductionist would, deny the cosmic significance of pedestrian affairs; it is here that the readiness takes shape. It is here that we live out our beliefs. It is here that we begin a new life. It is here that “God is in all” we do.⁶

A Simple Lifestyle

The whole point of living simply is in the return to God. Only in stripping away the old cumbersome baggage does one become free to contain and convey a sense of miracle. Simplicity is not the goal but a result. It can be seen as a way or a path only in the sense that it is an “expression of our encounter with the Light.” “Simplicity is the result of the releasing power of a new reality.”⁷

The sixth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel speaks of living in the power of this new reality. Jesus speaks there clearly and bluntly about simplicity in worshiping, giving, praying, fasting, saving, perceiving, eating, drinking, dressing. To what extent do we inappropriately complicate our lives with these matters at the expense of doing His will plainly expressed as follows: “Set your mind on God’s kingdom and his justice before everything else, and all the rest will come to you as well.”⁸

Quakers have a rich heritage from which to draw inspiration and instruction in matters of lifestyle. It might be good here to remind ourselves of some of those classic passages from John Woolman:

Truth did not require me to engage in much cumbrous affairs.⁹
To labor for an establishment in divine love where the mind is disentangled from the power of darkness is the great business of man’s life.¹⁰

. . . amidst all this confusion, and these scenes of sorrow and distress, can we remember the Prince of Peace, remember that we are his disciples, and remember that example of humility and plainness which he set for us, without feeling an earnest desire to be disentangled from everything connected with selfish customs in food, in raiment, in houses, and all things else; that being of

Christ's family and walking as he walked, we may stand in that uprightness wherein man was first made, and have no fellowship with those inventions which men in the fallen wisdom have sought out.¹¹

Woolman's contentment with a "plain way of living" speaks not only to standing in "that uprightness wherein man was first made" but also to surviving in a world threatened as never before with ecological disaster. Our ethical traditions take on new meaning and relevance today. One cannot write off Woolman's belief in a creation abundantly endowed with the resources to support simple living as merely symptomatic of a pioneering age; he did not garner this insight from his society but from a devotion to the message of Christ.

Woolman's witness offers an alternative to the notion that material wants are infinite and must inevitably place inhabitants of the earth in a state of impoverishment. For a people who take simplicity seriously, the issues of Garret Hardin's lifeboat ethics may not arise. If there is, as Woolman says, a "use of things which is consistent with universal righteousness," the discovery of such a use allows us to avoid a grim preoccupation with security.¹² We begin to make sense of Jesus' statement: "Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it; and whoever loses it will save it, and live."¹³ But perhaps far more important than the pragmatic benefits of simple living are the spiritual events that are facilitated by a realization like Woolman's that "the real wants of life are easily attained."¹⁴

Such a change in living does not mean that mundane events disappear; it simply means that we see them differently. On one level preserving life by losing life appears utterly ridiculous. It suggests that ineptitude and irresponsibility are virtues. Yet it can take on another meaning. Discovering a "use of things which is consistent with universal righteousness" does not mean that we ignore economics or other matters; it in fact means an expansion of knowledge. It means a liberation from seeing our existence only in material terms and from focusing our consciousness solely on immediate choices and events.

A Metaphor for Eschatological Living

At this point a practical outline of simple living might seem appropriate, but I choose to refrain from the somewhat dubious undertaking of cataloging practices and instead suggest a possible metaphor for the frame of mind that makes sense of saving by losing.

Friends, and all others with similar faith, seem to behave as if they believed in some sort of cosmic "uncertainty principle." The metaphorical "uncertainty principle" suggested here is borrowed

from the remarkable developments that led physicists like Werner Heisenberg to see the physical universe in a manner quite different from the classical, mechanistic view of Newtonian physics. Fritjof Capra describes Heisenberg's uncertainty principle well:

It means that, in the subatomic world, we can never know both the position and momentum of a particle with great accuracy. The better we know the position, the hazier will its momentum be and vice versa. We can decide to undertake a precise measurement of either of the two quantities; but then we will have to remain completely ignorant about the other one. It is important to realize . . . that this limitation is not caused by the imperfection of our measuring techniques, but is a limitation of principle. If we decide to measure the particle's position precisely, the particle simply does not have a well-defined momentum, and vice versa.¹⁵

So, we must choose between seeing particle or seeing wave. If we wish to view a subatomic entity as particle, it cannot be wave, and if we wish to view it as wave, its particleness vanishes. The very act of observation alters the reality we observe. In John Wheeler's words, "One has to cross out that old word 'observer' and put in its place the new word 'participator.' In some strange sense the universe is a participatory universe."¹⁶

In metaphysics there also seem to be two simultaneous visions of reality that vie for our attention, yet we find ourselves unable to function fully as human beings when one or the other captures our attention. If we see only that which is immediately visible, we wallow in a confusing, despairing darkness. But the alternative focus seems to be an escapist otherworldliness that denies the spiritual significance of our earthliness. I am a bit troubled about appropriately labeling these two metaphysical (and metaphorical) equivalents to wave and particle. Somehow the words must be indicative of creation as a phenomenal realm and a spiritual realm. Whatever the best words might be, my point is that if we choose a phenomenological focus to the exclusion of a spiritual one, we miss understanding the nature of our being. It leads to either a refusal to acknowledge our presence as part of a created order or a denial of our essential spirituality.

Heisenberg tells us that to insist on "wave" or to insist on "particle" is to maintain a fragmented and shallow understanding of the physical realm. If so, then it should not surprise us that this same sort of limited consciousness can occur on other levels. Perhaps we should be asking ourselves how we make fragmented and false distinctions between spirit and matter, between what is now and what is to come. The metaphor has been useful to me by suggesting the

limitations of a mindset that resists seeing Christ as man and as God and that resists the notion of addressing that of God in everyone. Does it stretch the metaphor too far to suggest that we are bound to misunderstand ourselves if we cannot acknowledge that we are at once earthly and heavenly? Can we understand the Fall as a denial of our heavenliness, as a refusal to live on two levels or in two realms at once? Can we understand redemption as the end to such a separation?

I cannot resist drawing a lengthy quote from Thomas Kelly's *A Testament of Devotion*, for he offers a valuable glimpse of living at two levels:

There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we may be thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship and [possess] a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings.

The secular world of today values and cultivates only the first level, assured that *there* is where the real business of mankind is done, and scorns, or smiles in tolerant amusement, at the cultivation of the second level—a luxury enterprise, a vestige of superstition, an occupation for special temperaments. But in a deeply religious culture men know that the deep level of prayer and of divine attendance is the most important thing in the world. It is at this deep level that the real business of life is determined. The secular mind is an abbreviated, fragmentary mind, building only upon a part of man's nature and neglecting a part—the most glorious part—of man's nature, powers and resources. The religious mind involves the whole of man, embraces his relations with time within their true ground and setting in the Eternal Lover. It ever keeps close to the fountains of divine creativity. In lowliness it knows joys and stabilities, peace and assurances, that are utterly incomprehensible to the secular mind. It lives in resources and powers that make individuals radiant and triumphant, groups tolerant and bonded together in mutual concern, and is bestirred to an outward life of unremitting labor.¹⁷

And further along in the same chapter, he makes a most important observation:

At first the practice of inward prayer is a process of alternation of attention between outer things and the Inner Light. Preoccupation with either brings the loss of the other. Yet what is sought is not alternation, but simultaneity, worship undergirding

every moment, living prayer, the continuous current and background of all moments of life.¹⁸

Perhaps only in this simultaneity do we begin moving from the unreal to the real, from the partial to the complete. For me, such experiences of simultaneity pulse with eschatological meaning. A dualism is defeated and we no longer abstractedly exclude the Kingdom of Heaven.

Simplicity's Statement

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's statement, "Man cannot live simultaneously in reconciliation and in disunion, in freedom and under the law, in simplicity and discordancy," suggests that I might just as well have written a paper on reconciliation as an eschatological statement or freedom as an eschatological statement or any number of other such themes.¹⁹ I do think that such subjects could be developed, but as a student of economics I am particularly concerned with simplicity as an alternative to the discordancy of a political economy that does not derive from an inner harmony. Economics as it is now practiced fails to suggest adequate guides for human action because it operates from discordant premises about happiness. As a consequence of failing to recognize the significance of realms beyond the immediate, most economists have been powerless to make sense of the economic affairs of *this* realm. Simplicity works because it is a model for allocating time, effort, and materials that springs from an inner integration. One cannot really choose to live simply, but the Quaker experience has been that one is empowered to renounce struggle and striving by the living force of God within. John Woolman's "outward life became simplified on the basis of an inner integration. He found that we can be heaven-led men and women, and he surrendered himself completely, unreservedly to that blessed leading, keeping warm and close to the Center."²⁰

I have perhaps made my point far too circuitously, but I have thought it important to paint a portrait of simplicity not as a pattern or position but as one of the essences of a unified life, a life that is whole because the dualism is gone and heaven and earth, spirit and flesh, no longer seem to be totally alien and separate realms. I believe there is a place where we begin to experience our selves and our events as mere shadows or reflections of a whole side of reality that we have barely noticed. Simple living begins with, and is sustained by, such an awareness. The Presence frees and empowers us to live radically different lives. It is here perhaps, in

the simultaneity of our experience and our expectation of the Kingdom, that Friends have formulated an eschatology. Expecting the presence of God, our vision awakens and we begin to see in our personal events the reflections of eternal life.

But even when Friends experience such hope, we often remain understandably reluctant to detail the end and meaning of history. To have clues, to have a foretaste, to receive promises are all events quite different from detailed prediction. A well-developed eschatology seems to many Friends to be beyond our province; we cannot experience the entire future of creation before it comes to pass. When we are truthful about it, we must admit that we barely understand the present. And yet right there—in the barely discernible present—is the link to events hidden in the future. As we learn to receive the gift of life in its temporal sense, as we find union with God at a temporal moment, just then we lose our limitation in time and space and glimpse something of that which is to come.

Such an experience does not invalidate our earthliness—any more than “wave” invalidates “particle”—it simply reminds us of our myopia. In childlike simplicity, we grow a bit. We begin to see the meaning that heaven might have; we begin to experience *that within* which will carry and nurture our personalities after bodily death. This is hardly a perspective about which I wish to be dogmatic. But I do think it is an experience that many Friends share. We are not likely to be persuaded by theological argument, but I think that many of us do come to moments of conviction in our spiritual journeys that enliven a certain heavenly homesickness—a drawing into and knowing of that which once seemed beyond sense.

It seems to me that when these moments of conviction do occur, our heavenly visions ought to and do jar us into a new awareness of the continuity between what is to come and what we experience now. The promises and hints we perceive are not negotiable instruments to be locked up in a safe, but are inspirations to be unleashed here and now. As other papers in this volume report, the experience of early Friends was characterized to no small degree by eschatological proclamation. The extent to which George Fox and others spoke apocalyptically may be uncomfortable and even offensive to many within 20th C. Quakerdom. Without attempting to come to terms here with these rich and forceful historical writings, I would quote one early statement that bears on the theme of my paper. The following passage from Barclay summarizes and interprets early Quaker eschatology in a way that compellingly reaches across three centuries:

When we hear them talk foolishly about heaven and hell and the last judgment, we urge them to depart from the hellish condition they are in. We ask them to come to the judgment of Christ in their hearts, to believe in the Light, and follow it, in order to be able to sit in the heavenly places that are in Christ Jesus. From this, they maliciously say that we deny any heaven or hell except that which is within us, and that we deny any general judgment.

The Lord knows what ugly slanders they cast upon us. For God has raised us for the purpose of confounding the wisdom of the wise, and bringing to naught the understanding of the prudent. He did it so that we might pull down the dead, dark, corrupt image and mere shadow and shell of Christianity with which AntiChrist has deceived the nations. He did it in and by his own Spirit in a despised people so that no flesh could glory in his presence.²¹

From this we get a picture of early Friends refusing to compress all experience into the apparent mechanisms of one realm. They were shocked and alarmed by a church that stubbornly and piously rejected the significance of Christ's coming. They knew that every action reflected belief, and they were troubled by what they saw.

The witness of Friends, both past and present, emphasizes the reality of redemption. At every turn in life is the invitation to live in those heavenly places. It is in daily events that wholeness develops and that hope becomes something beyond mere wishful thinking. Simplicity speaks of a life that participates in shared creativity with God and, infused with a sense of miracle, experiences the resources and powers of the eternity that is now unfolding.

1. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, Revised edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1954), p. 17.
2. Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941), p. 73.
3. Dean Freiday, "A Common Quakerhood?" in *What Future for Friends, Report of the St. Louis Conference: A Gathering of Concerned Friends*, 1970, pp. 16-29.
4. Kelly, p. 56.
5. 1 Corinthians 15:26, 28, *NEB*. (Alternate reading on v. 26)
6. John 3:21, *NEB*.
7. Arthur Gish, *Beyond the Rat Race* (New Canaan, Connecticut: Keats Publishing, 1973), p. 148.
8. Matthew 6:33, *NEB*.
9. *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, edited by Phillips P. Moulton (New York: Oxford, 1971), p. 53.
10. Woolman, p. 250.
11. Woolman, p. 253.
12. Woolman, p. 54.

13. Luke 17:33, *NEB*.
14. Woolman, p. 69.
15. Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (Berkeley, California: Shambhala Publications, 1975), p. 158.
16. Capra, p. 141.
17. Kelly, pp. 35-36.
18. Kelly, p. 40.
19. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 35.
20. Kelly, p. 117.
21. *Barclay's Apology in Modern English*, edited by Dean Freiday, 1967, p. 439.