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Letters

To the editor:

The review-article by Eva Pinthus in *Friends Quarterly* (January 1974) contains penetrating criticism of our issue on sacraments (*QRT,* Vol. 14, No. 4) on which I want to comment. She asks: when is ritual just meaningless magic, and when is it essential if we are to stay in touch with our roots? Ruth Pitman, in the article quoted in my essay, has zeroed in on this same point. Shaking hands at the close of Meeting — mentioned by both — is plainly a ritual. "Ritual" to me is not a Bad Word. This particular ritual is rooted firmly in the realities of our particular culture in respect to how people reaffirm their sense of community. If Quakerism had arisen in Japan, we might all bow to one another instead, and Japanese Friends should perhaps adapt to the realities of their culture by altering our ritual in this way. That's one extreme. I would place transubstantiation as Catholics understand it (ritual cannibalism) at the opposite extreme and unhesitatingly label it "cultic."

The problem isn't in setting out typologies, but in the vast gray area between extremes. In Zurich in 1525 the first group of Anabaptists rebaptized one another spontaneously and apparently without prior discussion. I suspect one could make a strong argument that in so doing, they were engaging in a ritual very much rooted in their social reality — but that the preservation of the baptism of adults among Mennonites today is cultic. The social environment has changed, and a spontaneous reaction has been turned into a form....

In my essay, in discussing process and event, I supposed that my readers all understood that cultic observances, as I use the term, are not rooted in reality, and are defined as made-up events, that is, non-events. Both for brevity, and because I'm not sure myself how and on what principles we draw a line between real and magic rituals, I didn't go into this. Besides, the basic point, the obvious difference between the two extremes, seemed self-evident.

Well, it wasn't. Vail Palmer in his Introduction pointed out that on the face of it, my process-events argument can be used to support outward sacraments. Eva Pinthus went

further, and stated that therefore my whole discussion was irrelevant — a statement that simply wipes out the heart of the essay, not to speak of two years of writing successive versions trying to make a complicated point crystal-clear. But it is perfectly true that my essay is without merit or meaning unless one understands that cultic observances are defined as non-events....

Therefore this short restatement: (1) Religion is not valid unless it is a process, *e.g.,* the various processes of change I described; (2) a process is made up of a series of events; the events make up a process because they go together and point in a direction; (3) religion is not magic or cult; ritual cultic events do not count as real events (they do have great meaning to persons who have been brainwashed into believing that religion is cultic, but Friends denounce that view as apostasy, and insist that religion is all the processes of inward change that happen to us when we try to practice discipleship); (4) the Quaker definition of "sacraments" must insist upon the processual function of events definable as sacramental....

Now: The baptismal event is the inward conviction that one is a sinner needing forgiveness and not deserving it, and that nevertheless God does forgive. That's certainly a non-cultic definition. I've written of how, to be valid, it must be processual; it must lead somewhere; it must happen again and again, ever deeper. Query: Must this be emotionally felt to be valid? I insist that the answer is and must be "no." The baptismal perception may, for example, validly be an intellectual one. Or, I am sure many people are like me in usually becoming aware of such things as baptism retrospectively: I find a stop in conscience, I inquire as to its source, and I realize that something of great spiritual meaning happened to me when I wasn't noticing.

Carl Davidson, though, accused *QRT* of negativism in not emphasizing felt inward baptism as the road into membership (Letters, Vol. 15, No. 1). In a different and broader way, Eva Pinthus says this, too. Both write favorably of the Pentecostal model of charismatic experience. This worries me.

Those who have had charismatic inward experiences of being baptized, or, say, of being mystically united with God, enliven the church enormously by showing and sharing their joy in the Lord, and we need them. But we must not let them impose their emotionally felt experience as normative. We swim into dangerous waters when we accept any doctrine that feeling good is what religion is all about. Charismatic experience simply isn't all that common. To make it a door

through which one must pass to be a valid disciple of Christ is to exclude most of humanity from any hope of discipleship, and to make of Quakerism a sensationalist sect. Let me restate that more personally. I'll be damned (literally) if I permit anybody to exclude me from the church, merely because I'm inhibited enough (if that's the explanation) to be incapable, usually, of the more extreme forms of religious sensation. Nor will I accept a status as a second-class Christian, nor admit that I am disqualified from doing my part in offering the church's ministry to *all* kinds and conditions of humanity.

It is interesting that two critics want baptism to be some sort of door into membership. This relates centrally to our conversations with Mennonites and Brethren, and the key role of believer baptism in the Anabaptist tradition. Historical accident has made ritual baptism and baptismal vows the road into formal membership in the discipleship community in Anabaptism. Classical Quakerism had no less central an emphasis both on discipleship community and on baptism, but we started and continued in a different way. We got along for a while without formal membership, and when it came in, evidently nobody ever thought of requiring a profession of an experience of inward baptism.

Rather, the Quaker counterpart to believer baptism was a focus on the fruits of the spirit. Members were expected to show alteration of life away from worldly norms (religion is a process, is change); if they didn't, in due course they were removed from membership. Inquiries were not made as to what inward experiences one had, or what label should be attached to them, or whether they happened suddenly or by slow unnoticed degrees. In practice this was a non-cultic and carefully undefined believer baptism. Its subversion today has many causes, but a primary cause is the "seeker" image replacing our former emphasis on being "finders," and here is where Carl Davidson and his associates can help us enormously, if they avoid sensationalist doctrines.

Focus on the fruits of the spirit has two opposite dangers, and Friends have fallen off into both: Narrow legalism, or perversion of process thinking into the attitude that anything goes so long as somebody claims to be following his particular light. I do not advocate processualism without an emphasis that truth is unchangeable and not relativistic, nor indeed without the preaching of baptism. But the Anabaptists have the problem of narrow legalism, too, and on top of that the usual problems over the correct form of baptism and communion, and over formalism as such. If there are Friends

who wonder if we need to institute rituals of believer baptism, there are also Anabaptists who wonder if they ought to discard such rituals. Such persons in both traditions, and many who disagree with them, all seek the same thing — ways of creating valid discipleship community that can truly get busy doing the Lord's business.

As a Quaker-Anabaptist ecumenist, I long for some sort of non-legalistic, non-relativistic, non-cultic, and non-sensationalist counterpart of believer baptism that can appeal to both traditions. Is this possible? Well, suppose that to become a member one had to express substantial agreement with a clear statement of the nature of discipleship community, and of the life-altering character of personal commitment to it? The new "Publishers of Truth" group has chosen this path, with a statement to most of which Quaker and Anabaptist reconstructionists can fervently agree, although I wish it borrowed more heavily from Mennonite baptismal vows. The obvious danger here is creedalism, and indeed the "Publishers" do strike me as rather creedal. But creedalism is a matter of degree. As I look at the people in both our traditions who want a more meaningful discipleship, I feel we need worry more in this generation about cult, legalism, relativism, and sensation, than about creed; if all solutions involve one of these, I'll risk creed, believing we would manage to be moderate and charitable in applying it.

R. W. Tucker

To the editor:

John Yungblut's stimulating article on "Prayer in Solitude" (*QRT*, Vol. 15, No. 2) reflects the tender but searching spirit that has made him one of my favorite theological adversaries. Nevertheless it seems important to point out that the article represents, to me, an honorable but desperate attempt to maintain a belief in the validity of prayer by one who has apparently lost faith in the God to whom one *can* pray. And, in view of the author's assumption that he reflects advanced Quaker thinking on the subject, it seems even more important to point out that many of us do not find ourselves in that situation.

There is one passage in "Prayer in Solitude" that seems to sum up the author's present viewpoint:

> We so easily forget that the *only* place man has *ever* found God is in himself or in other men.

> We have been *beguiled* into thinking that men and women in biblical times had some kind of direct confrontation by a transcendent God in acts of revelation. *The fact is* that their experience was one of the immanence of God in themselves or in other men. *Then* they promptly projected the source of the experience out there upon a transcendent God. . . . even Jesus could find his God *only* in the depths of his own being and in other men. *Afterward,* he could speak of God's concern for the birds of the air, and the lilies of the field. (pp. 4-5, italics added)

Now, my question is simply: *how does John Yungblut* KNOW *this?* He does not tell us that this is his *opinion,* consistent with his own theological views (which, clearly, is what it is); he tells us that "the fact is" that Jesus and other biblical people were totally mistaken about the source of their experience. Has he discovered something in the text that has escaped the rest of us? Or is he privy to the inner psychological workings of these men and women who lived centuries ago, and who have left us what they certainly believed were accurate records of their experience of God?

I would think that intellectual honesty requires us either to take seriously the central experience of these men and women (reserving the right to quibble over details), or to look elsewhere for spiritual guidance. And the central assertion of their testimony is consistently that of communication from a transcendent Creator who is nevertheless both able and willing, even anxious, to reach out to his creation. The sad circumstance that God has apparently never seen fit to reach out to John Yungblut, or to me, in such dramatic fashion does not give us the logical right to deny the possibility. Indeed, if we do deny the possibility, aren't we perhaps making such communication more difficult?

The end result of this and similar passages is to limit rather drastically our understanding of the nature of God. Not only is God's transcendence denigrated in the passage quoted, but the author also rules out any possibility that God can reach us through the natural creation. It is probable that most people first find God "within" and then discover him in action throughout the universe (which is an entirely different matter from insisting that we merely *project* the "God within" onto the presumably godless world around us). But is it not also possible that others may first find God in the natural

creation, and then within themselves and others? And is it not also conceivable that an all-powerful God could communicate directly with some of us?

It seems ironic that as John Yungblut's conception of the universe expands under the stimulus of contemporary scientific theory and achievement, his understanding of God appears to become more constricted. There is an implication here that the "expanded universe" is somehow too large, too complex for God to have responsibility over it, so that his influence must be limited to the affairs (and primarily the internal, personal affairs) of mankind. This is a flattering (if primitive) concept: a benign deity with nothing to do but watch over *me* — but it seems a rather depressing reduction from the biblical view of God the creator of all things, who is nevertheless also concerned about my personal well-being, and about the well-being of men and women in history (not to mention those two-for-a-farthing sparrows).

I do not claim to "know" that God is both transcendent and immanent, both "out there" (wherever *that* is) and "in here" (wherever, for that matter, *that* is). This is simply what I *believe,* on what I accept as good authority, but with full knowledge that I may someday (or, may never) find out that I am wrong. But "the fact is" that the author of "Prayer in Solitude" has told us what he "knows" about what God is not; in this he seems to me representative of a sizable group of contemporary Quaker thinkers. These Friends strive eagerly for new understandings, seeking to encompass all facets of modern knowledge. They refuse to be content with old, well-worn "truths." Nevertheless I have to insist that they represent a dogmatic, fundamentalist tendency in contemporary Quakerism, forever telling us what we can and cannot, must and must not believe.

My problem is that I have already been told what to believe about God by Jesus Christ himself — and somehow he strikes me as a more reputable authority on that subject than any of my contemporaries.

J. H. McCandless