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THE 1955 UNION AND THE FUTURE OF FRIENDS

RUTH M. PITMAN

Paul Anderson has called my bluff. For years I have said, often and publicly, that the 1955 union of the Hicksite and Orthodox yearly meetings in Philadelphia was a tragedy for both sides. Now I must explain this on paper and subject it to critical examination. I hope, however, to do more. Beyond “explaining” why and how it happened, I shall try to indicate a few principles with broader application than Philadelphia, or even Friends in general, and offer a few themes of hope for the future. My evidence is anecdotal and personal. You must supply your own experience, deductions, and critique.

THE BACKGROUND

The great schism of 1827/28 began in Philadelphia. Consequently the sense of guilt was greatest there. When Philadelphia Orthodox was tempted to split again, later in the century, Friends resisted, holding the yearly meeting together by not corresponding, i.e., by not recognizing either the Gurneyites or the Wilburites as the legitimate heirs to the Quaker heritage. Nevertheless, Orthodox Friends sorted themselves out into meetings that had sympathies with either one side or the other. Unprogrammed worship was not an issue; Philadelphia Friends never hired ministers nor planned hymns during worship.

My parents met and courted in their local Methodist church, but decided to look for another denomination in which to marry and raise their family. In 1932, they settled on Friends. Geography and circumstances gave them a choice of three meetings, one Hicksite, one Orthodox with Gurneyite sympathies, and one Orthodox with Wilburite sympathies. They settled on the last, the Conservative meeting. My mother said that they felt the theology was nearest to what they had grown up with, though I still do not fully understand why this principle would not have led them to the Gurneyite meeting. I suspect that the influence of some kind and wise old Friends may have had more to do with the decision than theological dissection, or perhaps they rejected the thing that Hicksites and Gurneyites have

in common, a proclivity to activism.¹ I grew up in the meeting with Wilburite sympathies, attended the Gurneyite First-day school for a few years, went to the Orthodox day school, followed by a Gurneyite college and graduated in the year of the union. After that I taught in a Wilburite school, where I felt very at home, had a good look at German Friends, with several glimpses of British Friends, spent several years in an unaffiliated meeting started by an isolated Hicksite couple and sponsored by the Friends World Committee, was part of Friends in Canada (united), joined QTDG, worked in a Hicksite boarding home for the elderly, and now live among the most extreme of the Gurneyites, in Eastern Region.

HOW THE UNION CAME ABOUT

Two things drove the union, guilt and the then popular ecumenical movement, but, like other monumental decisions, notably the changes in sexual standards among British and Philadelphia Friends, the decision to unite was not a conscious decision of the yearly meetings; it was forced gradually by a pressure group. (Was the movement to free slaves also forced by a pressure group? The comparison might be interesting.) In the case of the union, the pressure group was young Friends from both sides. They met together, enjoyed seminars and retreats together, square danced together and intermarried. After all, what difference was there? The worship forms were the same. The lifestyles were mostly the same. If theology was needed, Rufus Jones supplied his mystical interpretation of Quakerism and some (now discredited) history that placed George Fox in the line of great mystical thinkers. Through two world wars, the American Friends Service Committee afforded the outlet for well doing and social action. In anticipation of the great day of union, several united monthly meetings sprang up, Radnor under Jones's care and Chestnut Hill founded by a youthful, progressive group from large and staid Germantown M.M. (Orthodox). At the yearly meeting level, some of the committees began to cooperate. Why, for example, should both yearly meetings have committees on Indian affairs doing the same work? Why not do it together?

By the time I was in my teens, the young Friends were no longer young, and the decision to merge was inevitable. I was in the Orthodox yearly meeting in the early 1950's when the death of a prominent minister, of whom I was especially fond, was announced

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and a memorial minute for him read. He had apparently been the great holdout on the Orthodox side. There was a wave of joy among some Friends, and a year or two later the new yearly meeting became official. No one dared to object. William Bacon Evans, known for his insight and his wit, remarked that it would be like water, two parts H and one part O. The O's were indeed outnumbered two to one, but I and others hoped that the metaphor might have other implications. I hoped the weight was on the O side. Some may have hoped for the Water of Life. Tom Brown told me that he hoped the new group would not be so big that some Friends would feel lost and unneeded. Everyone hoped for the best.

THE DYNAMICS OF UNION

Just a few months ago, I heard a United Methodist archivist tell a group of Methodist young people interested in the ministry, that “sometimes, when things are put back together, they are not the same as they were before.” Are they ever? For one thing, controversy must be suppressed. In 1955, everyone understood that there was no arguing over the Trinity or the Atonement. Theology, like sexual behavior today, was to be an individual matter. The new god was tolerance. And “every man did what was right in his own eyes,” being extremely careful not to offend anyone from the other side.

But practical decisions had to be made. Among Hicksite Friends there had been a long history of resistance to the life appointment of ministers and elders, whereas Orthodox Friends regarded the recognition of these gifts as a sacred rite, akin to ordination in the Catholic Church. In the new yearly meeting, the Meeting of Ministers and Elders was reduced to a committee with rotating membership, charged with promoting the spiritual life of the meeting. Monthly meetings were free to record ministers if they liked, but minutes were no longer to be passed through quarterly meetings and on to the yearly meeting to be approved and recorded. Choice prevailed.

Not only Hicksite history is involved here; trends in American society also influenced the decision. Democracy is one of our country's most cherished values. I can remember receptionists at Arch St. Meeting House being almost apologetic about the traditional facing benches in the West Room. “We are more democratic now,” she explained. The circle, or hollow square, became the approved

seating in new meetinghouses, like Earlham College's, and even in old ones like Great Britain's.² Truth be told, there had long been tension between the power of the Meeting of Ministers and Elders and the Monthly Meeting. When I read the first hundred years of monthly meeting minutes from Chesterfield Monthly Meeting in New Jersey, a large meeting with more than half a dozen preparative meetings, I was struck by how few Friends were appointed to responsible positions. Friends were not "democratic" then. Was our country? Certainly not in the modern sense of one man, one vote, or in the notion that one person's opinion is just as valid as another's. Interestingly, in Eastern Region, the move away from "democracy" has been dramatic in recent years. It certainly solves the problem of disagreements in business meetings.

Individualism in faith and practice, though very American, does not build a society, let alone a Society. There has to be a better basis of cohesion to give meaningful support to members and a framework in which children can grow up. Unity was found in hardened rituals and in serving whatever cause came along: eradication of traditional opposition to arts and dancing, work in race relations, black causes, prisoner visitation, "trial marriage," women's rights, the gay agenda, the green movement, political action, and, above all, peace and non-violence.

HICKSITE DISSATISFACTION

A quarter of a century after the union, I found myself working and visiting in several formerly Hicksite meetings and institutions. Sometimes, I was able to draw out old Hicksites and get them to comment on the Orthodox and the new yearly meeting. Even after all that time, these people were still repeating what they had heard for nearly two centuries, "The Orthodox run everything." I heard it so often that I finally challenged one group to name five old Orthodox who "ran everything" in the new yearly meeting. They came up with the name of one influential, formerly Orthodox Friend, but beyond that everyone in the bureaucracy or active in non-paid positions was either formerly Hicksite or new to the yearly meeting. The new, paid position of General Secretary had been filled by a Hicksite. When the original Orthodox clerk of yearly meeting had been replaced, it was with a Hicksite. The truth at that point was even more lopsided than what one would have expected from the two-to-one ratio.

Actually, the majority of the people who ran things by that time were new to the Society, often refugees from high churches that objected to remarriage after divorce, from low churches whose soul saving was offensively aggressive, and from mainstream churches that offered too little social action. Most of the few birthright Friends were too young to have been steeped in old sentiments. The comic part of these remarks was that every one of them came from people who either lived or worshipped within a short walk and a half hour's trolley ride of the Friends Center.

The remarks were something of a surprise to me. The Orthodox had not run things since the separation, and they certainly did not run things after the union. I thought the important issue in the separation was theological, unitarianism vs. trinitarianism. The leader of our (Gurneyite) First-day school had made sure that we learned the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy" (Nicaea). She did not want Orthodox children going to the First-day school held at the Hicksite meeting where they would most certainly not learn "God in three persons." At the first Orthodox meeting that Rob Tucker attended regularly, he told me there was an elderly Friend who preached regularly on the importance of the Virgin Birth. Rob found that preferable to the "popcorn" and "I have been thinking" ministry that he had grown up with in his (admittedly atypical) Hicksite meeting.

One old Hicksite foe of Orthodox theology lamented, "Things were so nice before the Orthodox came in and ruined everything." Did she mean Rufus Jones and his disciples? If so, she had a point. Technically, he came from the Orthodox side, but the theology he preached was a lowest-common-denominator theology, not really the voice of either side. His emphasis on direct experience of God, without the mediation of the Bible or Christ, had not been his own experience, nor had it really been a heavy point in either yearly meeting. It was an observation Friends had made about the power of the Holy Spirit, but they never intended to tempt the Spirit by rejecting the aids that had been granted them or depriving others of these aids. The effect of Jones' mysticism was to blur the lines between the two theologies, thus facilitating the union. It would be easy to see Jones as the villain of the story, but he was well supported, by the longing to erase the past, by the *Zeitgeist*, by his position as famous author and professor, and by his accomplishments in the AFSC. Lewis Benson was talking about his discovery of Christ in the works of George Fox, but he was too young, and was without position or publications. No one was

listening. That did not happen until QTDG was founded; Jones was dead, and the union had been accomplished on the basis of unity in action and freedom in theology.

Finally, I discussed the new yearly meeting with another, more incisive old Hicksite. “Why!” she said drawing herself up to her full height, “It’s nothing but service committee!” I had to agree.

ON THE ORTHODOX SIDE

My meeting pretended for a while that we could still record ministers and elders, but it was futile; the meaning was gone. Perhaps most poignant was Rob Tucker’s experience, which he has written about—somewhere in *QRT*, I believe. He was an adventurous Hicksite lad. Sometime in the years shortly before the union, he dropped by the Orthodox yearly meeting to find out what was happening. It was the beginning of yearly meeting and the Meeting of Ministers and Elders was holding its session. “They were ministering to one another!” he exclaimed elated. The union meant for him an opportunity to join a formerly Orthodox meeting without offending his staunchly Hicksite family. Shortly thereafter, he went back to the opening of yearly meeting. The ministry was gone. It was a committee meeting. He went home and cried.

Bacon Evans, who lived on for nearly a decade after the union lamented that “everything we had valued” had vanished. It was not only the structure of the Meeting of Ministers and Elders, it was also Christ. Friends longed so much to repair the schism that they were very careful not to offend the other side, as they understood it. The Friend who ran the First-day school and the one who preached on the Virgin Birth died, as did their kind, and the younger generation barely heard of such issues as the Trinity or the Atonement or the divinity of Christ and did not dare to consider them if they had—at least not out loud. They hoped in Friends’ ritual. Higher Criticism and the educational trend away from any memorization, which had been the basis of the ministry among the Orthodox, undermined the use of the Bible as the basis of living. “Theology divides,” many said, so it was suppressed. Unity was found in doing.

These experiences, along with what I have seen in the United Church of Canada, the United Church of Christ, and even what I heard at the Methodist Archives, have made me leery of any church

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union. Far better that each group live out the implications of its faith! Tragic as separations are, unions are worse.

WHAT NOW?

At this point, more than half a century after the union, the old Hicksites and the old Orthodox are dead. The children born into the yearly meeting have largely drifted away, some to other churches, through marriage or conviction, some to education and secular society, some to stricter groups like the Bruderhof. Only a very few of us remember life before 1955, and most members are new to the Society since then. Tom Brown need not have worried. Membership has continued to drop; now anyone with an interest can easily get into a position of importance—paid or not—in whatever cause he chooses. As long as there are trust funds to spend, there will be people who want to do it. New members are attracted by the rituals, the peace testimony and the testimony on equality. When pressed for beliefs, Friends resort to some of the old minor insights, such as good people in other religions, “the priesthood of all believers,” and the authority of the “Spirit” rather than the Bible or Christ. Out of secondary insights, they try to build a whole religion. In core matters of faith and ethics, it is largely live and let live. Atheist, agnostic, and deist Friends are sometimes quite insistent on the validity of their faith, thus preventing others from experiencing, in community, the riches of the Christian heritage.

In America generally, some Gurneyites follow the middle Protestant road in Friends United Meeting. Other Gurneyites have mostly forgotten Joseph John Gurney and cast themselves with the broader American evangelical movement. Central Yearly Meeting maintains an evangelical Quaker conservatism by not recognizing any other Friends, and Conservative Friends struggle with internal stresses but shy away from discussion. They fear the divisiveness of theology and, even more, some of the pressing ethical issues, because they know all too well the divisions that resulted from trying to deal with issues in the past.

ONE MORE STORY

I taught for a couple of years in a denominational college, which was not Quaker. There I chanced, for a brief time, to become a “helper,”

in a huge philosophy course. The book the professor had the students read was A. J. Ayre's *Language, Truth and Logic*, the manifesto of logical positivism or materialism. What a sour man, and what a sour text to ask students to read, I said to myself. Shouldn't these tender minds read something uplifting and hopeful? What the "sour professor" had to say about his choice was that this was what the students needed to fight their way beyond. He was right about that. The hard core fundamentalist is as much a disciple of Ayre as any scientist. Rufus Jones was right to the extent that if our religion does not inspire awe and a sense of our own proportion with respect to the world around us, it misses reality.

Materialism is not the only challenge of our times. The values of our democratic society, the ongoing sexual revolution, the basis of the "Quaker values" touted by Quaker schools that no longer teach Quaker/Christian faith or history and have reduced the reading and study of the Bible to nearly nothing—these trends and probably more demand the best wisdom that can be offered. This is the basis of my love for Quaker Theological Discussion Group. Here the best thinkers and most concerned Friends come together to examine the issues of our times without any possibility of a power struggle for the heritage or the trust funds.

WHAT SHOULD THE ANSWER BE?

1) I think that any conclusions must be rooted in the Bible, not in verse quoting, as though quoting from a rule book, but in an understanding and appreciation for the Bible as a way of looking at the world, at Truth, and as a story that unites us into a people with a common ethic. It was the ethical root of Levinas' philosophy that I found so exciting at the 2010 Barnesville conference. Biblical ethics is not individualistic. While cherishing the individual, it is focused on society and on the future. 2) I think also that our conclusions must be consistent with Quaker history, and we must be clear about the consequences. Our non-practice of the outward sacraments is really a prophetic stand both to ourselves and to the broader Christian church. Prophetic stands have dangers and consequences. Eastern Region, where the physical elements are being pushed very hard, claims that their position is "biblical," but this is at best a half-truth; early Friends based their position on the Bible, too. The real reason is more probably a rejection of the prophetic stand in favor of church

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building and in favor of the valid insight that acting out sometimes induces an experience. Prophetic stands tend to keep a group small and let it blow away, if the fire burns down.

WHERE IS THE HOPE?

1) As I see it, Lewis Benson's great contribution, aside from his Fox scholarship, was to open liberal Friends to the possibility of using long forbidden Christian language. What it means to Philadelphia Friends is still a question, and regardless of what it means, it has to be lived and experienced to be genuine. 2) Thanks in part to QTDG, there do arise, from time to time, Friends who can cut through the superficialities as could John McCandless and Sandra Cronk. Even in the desert, Christ found both of them. 3) Philadelphia has started a number of courses in Quakerism. I cannot speak for the content. 4) With all my very grave reservations about Pendle Hill and ESR, I must admit that there are some people who have studied there who dig deep and find hidden treasure. This is what I see among liberal Friends.

CONSERVATIVE COMPARISONS

Conservative Friends merit a paragraph or two for the sake of comparison with Philadelphia's experience. Over the years, they have given and given—given through their schools, through their traveling ministry and sometimes in other forms of service like Civilian Public Service (especially during World War II) and teaching outside their yearly meetings—all of this beyond their numbers and with little or no remuneration. Iowa Yearly Meeting gave itself away by taking in independent monthly meetings, usually situated in university towns and formed under the Friends World Committee for Consultation. The newcomers longed for the rootedness that Conservative Friends offered, but the outcome was that today Iowa Yearly Meeting follows in the path of Friends General Conference. Their former identity has vanished. Conservative Friends in united yearly meetings, like Canada, have vanished.

In the 1950's and 60's, Ohio Yearly Meeting, too, had a flirtation with independent meetings like those in Iowa, but circumstances that included numbers and geography resulted instead in the formation

of Lake Erie Yearly Meeting as a part of FGC, while Ohio Yearly Meeting remained independent. The last tie broke over the question of homosexual “marriage.” However, the sexual revolution of the last 50 years bears down on Ohio Yearly Meeting still, and they are not articulate enough to respond or defend Friends’ tradition. Ohio had been in the habit of following Philadelphia, which, in turn, followed London. This is no longer possible. They have lost control of their school and their children have scattered, some to the evangelicals, some to more conservative groups, and others to secularism. A number of the birthright Friends would still like to follow Philadelphia; most of the Friends who have joined would rather not. Many of the newcomers were refugees from liberalism, just as many of the newcomers in Philadelphia were refugees from some form of evangelical Christianity, so there are internal stresses.

Nevertheless, the ministry continues, fueled by a sense of awe in worship and by much personal devotion which includes Bible reading. A resurgence in plain dress carries symbolic meaning.³ Though the memorization of Bible passages that was once required in the schools is gone, there is a new development based in the old practice of Collection and in traditional family devotions, “Bible reading after the manner of Conservative Friends,” reading aloud as led in a group. Another new venture is the little Friends Center at Barnesville, which offers seminars and retreats that attract people from outside the yearly meeting and often brings scholars or experienced Friends as leaders.

Although rural communities with their meetings are practically gone, a network of members and fellow travelers has grown up which reaches all the way around the world. It is held together by thousands of miles of travel and by every means of communication, from letters and publications to all forms of electronic media. The Wider Fellowship of Conservative Friends, a project of Ohio Yearly Meeting, has been holding a weekend retreat/conference in even numbered years, offering solace to the disenfranchised, refreshment to the faithful, information to the seekers, and the joy of union in the Lord. It also deserves mention that the yearly meeting has become more explicitly Christ centered over the last 60 years. The world of Christian business men’s associations, and the influx of refugees have both played a role in this.

In my corner of Gurneyite Friends, virtually all of the characteristically Quaker heritage has been jettisoned. Music, worship forms, teaching materials, and structures have all been imported from

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the general American evangelical movement. A Baptist minister will do quite as well as one raised in the Society, as long as he eventually reads a book or two on Friends (written from the evangelical Quaker viewpoint), does a little soul searching and answers a few questions. Nevertheless, there seems to be an emphasis on amendment of life, on a few social causes (feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, opposing abortion, nurturing the children, and especially evangelizing), and on a regular devotional life. These are noteworthy. I must leave the rest of the Gurneyite analysis to others.

ONE FINAL CONCERN

A wise and learned Canadian Friend once said that all religions fail in trying to deal with sin and evil. All branches of Friends have lost the Quaker ritual of confession and absolution (“Acknowledgements”). Granted that it was far too often perfunctory, granted that was legalistic, granted that it was often misused, granted that it rarely touched internal sin, but how do we uphold Truth? How do we make restitution? How do we truly forgive? I suggest that Friends of all sorts must come to a deeper understanding of the relationship between sin, suffering, and sacrifice, and that for any who call themselves Christian in any sense, this means a deep understanding of the Cross.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Some years after my parents joined the Conservative meeting, the formerly Gurneyite meeting was ready to be laid down. Rather than returning to the other Orthodox meeting (of Wilburite sympathies), from which they had originally been set off, they joined the Hicksite meeting. The common ground was, besides accessibility to suburban trains, the basic idea that the “world” was good but fixing things would make it even better. The history of London Yearly Meeting, too, reveals how easily a Gurneyite meeting becomes liberal.
- 2 Philadelphia Friends were on the cutting edge of the term-limit craze, which could serve as a second example of “democracy.” Term limits were firmly in place there by the time they swept the American legal system in the 1990’s. Here in Ohio, their popularity is fading; politicians rotate in and out of Columbus so fast that by the time they know what to do and how to do it they must leave office. Will Friends also move away from term limits? And if they do, what will be the motive?
- 3 How do we distinguish between the *Zeitgeist* and the Holy *Geist*? Among the many ambiguous symbolic meanings of plain dress is a rejection of the “world” in the hope that the flesh and the devil will flee, too. Long ago now, Evangelical Friends, as well, were sympathetic to this point of view. Attitude toward the “world” is an important part of separations and unions. In the case of Ohio Yearly Meeting, contact with Mennonites and Amish reinforces the tendency to plainness.