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FROM CUTTING EDGE TO CHOPPING BLOCK: RECLAIMING A QUAKER APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

JAMIE JOHNSON

Quaker historian Thomas Hamm, in his introduction to *Founded by Friends*, asks the question, “What, then, makes a Quaker college?”¹ In a movement that places great value on the ability to make communal decisions, his answer rings loudly from the bell towers of Quaker academe: “Today, there is no consensus.”² Though consensus may be lacking on that particular question, few would dispute the impact Quaker-founded colleges have had upon the American educational landscape, as colleges and universities founded by Friends have become some of the most prestigious educational institutions in America. What, though, has been the cost of this positioning? The majority of Quaker colleges were founded with a firm resolve to instill Quaker values in their students: to provide an education that, like the movement itself, was wholly devoted to the pursuit of truth as a deeply spiritual quest. Today, however, many Quaker colleges have become nearly indistinguishable from secular institutions of higher education. While these changes have been accompanied by larger enrollment numbers and a sense of institutional security, the loss of earlier understandings of mission presses the question as to whether some of the original educational vision of Friends might yet be recovered. In what is arguably on the cutting edge of higher education in America today, a reclamation of Quaker values as embodied within institutions of Christian higher education is as timely now as ever. Perhaps the chopping block of analysis may yet provide a way forward, as becoming formative communities of wisdom draws centrally upon the testimonies of Friends.

In 1856, Haverford became the first Quaker college in America. This founding coincided with what was the greatest period for college establishment in the history of America. One author notes that prior to 1830 only 20 permanent colleges had their beginning. Yet from 1830 to 1861, 133 more colleges were established!³ Though theological

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disagreements led to schisms within the American Friends movement, the commitment to higher education did not diminish. Following the founding of Haverford, eight more explicitly Quaker colleges were established—Guilford, Earlham, Swarthmore, William Penn, Bryn Mawr, George Fox, Malone, and Whittier—before 1895. This growth is even more astounding, considering that “since the 1650s, Quakers had regarded higher education as the abomination of desolation, a sop to the senses, a distraction from the tried and tribulated ways that led to holiness and salvation.”⁴

With a membership of approximately 100,000 during this time, the Society of Friends in North America created a network of colleges intended to provide a “guarded” education for Quaker students. According to Paul Lacey, this guarded education was to keep young Quakers from three particularly dangerous influences: “an unsupportive or dangerous environment, unsupportive or dangerous companions, and unsupportive, indifferent, or unfaithful guardians.”⁵ Though this was considered a worthy ideal, its broad attainment was finally too lofty. As the size of the Quaker movement did not substantially increase, and the number of colleges and universities continued to grow, Quaker schools were faced with the necessity to open their doors to a wider constituency in order to merely survive. With increasingly diverse student bodies came cultural changes that were often in direct opposition to the guarded education provided during the early years of most of the Quaker schools. These changes included the implementation of athletic teams, sororities and fraternities, and the abolishment of rules against such perceived vices as dancing and smoking. Another force, however, began sweeping the nation and institutions of higher education, creating an atmosphere that proved even more destructive to the historic religious values upon which Quaker schools were built: secularism.

THE SECULAR INFLUENCE

From its inception, higher education in America was founded upon religious ideals. The oldest and most prestigious institutions of today began as training grounds for Christian ministers in the newly formed colonies. These institutions, up until the mid-nineteenth century, held a common belief in the “unity of knowledge: that all truth flowed...from God.”⁶ Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, as a byproduct of the Enlightenment, this coherent view of truth began

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to fragment into what historians now call the secularization of the academy. According to James Turner, “Increasing specialization and fragmentation of knowledge contributed” to the disappearance of a coherent understanding of truth.⁷ This movement, coupled with a “weakening consensus on the existence of God, a belief...especially fragile in academic circles,” fostered the notion that the “unity of creation no longer seemed axiomatic.”⁸ The secularization process affected nearly every institution of higher education in America and seemed to move even more quickly through institutions whose emerging existence was chronologically coincidental with the rise of secularism.⁹ At a time when the doors to America’s Quaker colleges were widening in order to remain open, secularization had no trouble finding a home in the very places established by Friends to guard against the influence of the world.

To be fair, secularization in the academy showed no partiality, as all religious educational institutions faced the same challenge. William Ringenberg notes, “Some scholars have observed that the secularization process in higher education is an outgrowth of the secularization of America in general,” after the Civil War.¹⁰ Though it occurred simultaneously, secularization was much more pronounced in the academy than in society at large. Noticing the trend among traditionally orthodox institutions, some American denominations focused on developing Christian colleges that would support and transmit orthodox beliefs, providing a distinctively Christian education. While the earliest years of these institutions, like the Quaker colleges, were by no means immune to these secularizing forces, the successful ones did focus on creating places of learning protected from these forces—a desire not too different from the original Quaker schools seeking to provide a guarded education. Noting external and internal reasons for the impressive success of some Christian colleges may be instructive for Friends.

While the threat of secularization continued, the astounding growth of Christian colleges in the mid-twentieth century benefitted from three specific developments:

1. A newly prosperous economy following the Great Depression
2. The increasing popularity of higher education
3. Expanding forms of governmental aid to students and institutions

The ability for these newly formed Christian schools to accept a wide range of Christians, from their inception, proved to be an even greater boon to institutional viability when compared to the founding of Quaker colleges.¹¹ Yet, the most significant factor in their growth was a sustained focus on their educational mission, cast in explicitly religious terms. This may suggest a way forward for Friends, as well.

This portrait of American higher education is all too brief and incomplete, but sketching a general backdrop is important for understanding how the reclamation of a Quaker approach to higher education may yet be beneficial at the present time in America. While a strong economy, support from the government, and the popularity of higher education led to growth in the 20th century, these influences are either absent today or are waning. In addition, the diverse character of the Society of Friends has created a situation where, as Thomas Hamm notes, there are no commonly agreed upon characteristics inherent in a Quaker college or university. Although most Quaker colleges have historically articulated various aspects of Quaker distinctiveness, Hamm believes that only some “are honest in admitting that other identities, as Christian, as serving a local community, or as one of the nation’s leading liberal arts colleges, have become equally if not more important for them.”¹² With this in mind, one is left to ponder whether reclaiming Quaker values is at all possible, or even desirable, given the current state of higher education in America. If cherished Quaker values were not retainable in the past, can they be effectively pursued and practiced today?

QUAKER EDUCATION AND THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH

As has been previously noted, the earliest approaches to Quaker higher education initially aimed to provide a guarded education for Quakers. When this endeavor inevitably dissolved, what eventually took root was a commitment to pursue those Quaker values most compatible with the current state and future hopes of the institution, creating a re-identification with a seemingly more tenable pursuit. Thus, as *Founded by Friends* has so ably shown, one can find pockets of historic Quaker belief in nearly every college begun by Friends. While these approaches have yielded reputable, even excellent schools within the larger realm of higher education, they have fallen short of a coherent Quaker ideal. While such an ideal may include the perpetuation of the Society of Friends, from its conception the Quaker movement was more concerned with the pursuit, practice, and promise of the truth.

Reclaiming a Quaker approach to Christian higher education is not, at its foundation, a venture into the promotion of the Society of Friends. At the heart of this reclamation is the belief that the truth of Christ is eternal, and can be known personally in the midst of a community committed to certain values—values, while not unique to the Quaker movement, are historically embodied within it.

Reclaiming a Quaker approach to Christian higher education, of course, need not entail the establishment of new schools. In a market saturated with excellent schools one more would not make a difference, at least in the near future. Rather, with an understanding that, “Quaker ‘packaging’ is not a prerequisite for Quaker convictions to make a positive difference in the world,” the hope is to reclaim a centered Quaker approach in an attempt to reinvigorate higher education and the Quaker movement itself.¹³ If the Society of Friends desires to have a continuing impact on the world through a nuanced approach to higher education, it must understand its heritage, “instead of looking elsewhere for patterns to imitate that would ultimately turn them into something very different from what they are.”¹⁴ Having been founded on the conviction of George Fox that, “there is one, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition,” a Quaker approach to higher education should seek to, as Paul Lacey has written, “prepare us to be open to the sacred, to learn how to recognize the sacred when people encounter it, and to discover their most appropriate responses to it.”¹⁵

In the pursuit of this ideal, though, a formidable problem remains: inherent in nearly every institution of higher education today are what George Dennis O’Brien calls dangerous “half-truths.”¹⁶ In his incisive analysis of the field, O’Brien argues that modern institutions of higher education are built upon half-truths, which if left unchallenged, may destroy their very foundations. These half-truths include, but are not limited to, issues of academic freedom, the centrality/necessity of the faculty, and the ability of these institutions to teach moral neutrality/moral value. While these half-truths deserve attention, it is his proposed remedy that is most valuable for this discussion. O’Brien asserts that in order to combat these half-truths, an institution of higher education must create depth in its students by offering an education defined by concentration, cohorting, continuity, connection, commitment, and conversation.¹⁷ Though he writes from a non-religious standpoint, the juxtaposition of O’Brien’s proposed remedy for the current state of higher education and the historical Quaker testimonies provides a

foundation for suggesting that the reclamation of a Quaker approach to Christian higher education is a worthy endeavor.

Noted Quaker educator Paul Lacey has stated that, “from the beginning, a fundamental purpose of Quaker schools has been to preserve their testimonies (truthfulness, simplicity, equality, and peace)...and to inculcate them in each new generation.”¹⁸ While commitment to these testimonies has been pursued in various ways, it is evident that a cutting-edge Quaker education cannot merely hope to preserve past customs at all costs, nor merely select *a la carte* those testimonies that seem to be most marketable while ignoring the rest. In education it is “a mistake to define virtues only by what is absent, rather than by what is present.”¹⁹ The final section of this paper will attempt to demonstrate how the historic Quaker testimonies may provide the most efficient foundation for Christian higher education to combat the half-truths assailing the institution, reclaiming the unity of truth as its *sine qua non*.

Centered on the truth of Quaker Testimonies, O’Brien asserts higher education is in danger of becoming irrelevant if it does not properly address the half-truths it purports to be foundational truths. As mentioned earlier, he suggests an education based on concentration, cohorting, continuity, connection, commitment, and conversation. O’Brien believes these characteristics are more likely to produce practical wisdom, which he defines as “the task of tradition and the assessing of traditions in the light of the reality revealed by traditions.”²⁰ In other words, practical wisdom is the ability to seek for and understand truth as unalterable and timeless, being revealed through the past, present, and future, rather than temporal and subject to the latest whims of the intelligentsia. O’Brien’s definitions are as follows:

Concentration: In a society that gives preference to choice, O’Brien suggests it may be more important to focus on that which is mundane and familiar. In an institution that idolizes discovery and de-parochialization, “nothing may be more important than that the student develop a deeply sensitive eye to the household of his or her own values.”²¹

Cohorting: Concentration is taken to a new level when we cohort students together so that they experience learning together. Cohorts create an equality of experience with the potential to breed growth, unlike a mere checklist of courses

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needing completion before graduation. Common experiences cause intimacy, and truth is intimate.

Continuity: As O'Brien writes, "One needs a continuity: a continuous, concentrated sifting and resifting to create insight and assurance."²² Truth is not always readily apparent. Its realization often comes through those things made constant in one's life.

Connection: Those things learned in the classroom are to be connected, in ways explicit and implicit, to the workings of the world. Truth is embodied not just in word, but in the combination of word and deed.

Commitment: This is described as the physical manifestation of connection as seen in the lives of those who teach in the academy. Commitment is seen in those individuals "committed to a deep tradition of value."²³

Conversation: This is in direct opposition to the current pedagogy of the modern institution, which ideologically and methodically drives a wedge between subjects in order to uphold academic freedom. Truth is not held within the walls of a well-protected silo or bunker, but made known through the connections revealed in all of life's pursuits when an integrative approach to knowledge is paramount.

While these suggestions may create an environment defined by "practical wisdom," they are too general to pose a focused catalyst for change. When viewed through the lens of the Quaker testimonies, though, they begin to take shape within the tradition of Quaker belief and practice to provide a structure upon which a Quaker approach to Christian higher education can re-emerge. The four main testimonies, defined by Paul Lacey as truthfulness, simplicity, equality, and peace, provide an integrative framework for envisioning a cutting-edge approach to higher education. This framework is as follows:

Truthfulness: Continuity and Commitment exemplify this testimony when they acknowledge that academic pursuits are most clearly embodied in a persistent faithfulness. As part of the Quaker testimony, this persistent commitment to truth-faithfulness includes knowledge of past Quaker values and beliefs, and the continued pursuit of their enduring relevance for today. In an academic community this takes form as members recognize that it is not the individual who defines truth, but it

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is truth that defines the individual. It continues to take form as members commit to common goals and values and avoid being “noncommittal” for the sake of objectivity.

Simplicity: Concentration exemplifies this testimony in its pursuit to simplify those things begging for the attention of the learner. The modern academy lacks a coherent identity upon which to build a concentrated pursuit of truth. The Quaker college is no stranger to this. As mentioned earlier, though Quaker higher education began as a concentrated effort to stabilize and invigorate the Society of Friends and the larger society as well, it soon became an enterprise marked not by Quaker distinction but by a broader acceptance that would appeal to a larger constituency. Yet, it seems that creating a community marked by density and not diffusion will be of utmost importance for the survival of higher education. Though Quaker history is rife with splintering and diffusion, the tradition was founded upon a common, timeless belief (“There is one, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition”). The Quaker testimony of simplicity has historically manifested itself in a consistent way, and it will continue to do so if its institutions of higher education concentrate on the values and beliefs upon which the Quaker movement was founded.

Equality: Cohorting and Conversation exemplify this testimony in their pursuit to create an experience upon which a communal pursuit of truth is exercised. The Quaker testimony of equality rests in the belief that each person is imbued with the presence of the Holy Spirit, and as a result, has access to the truth. As one of the foundational pillars of the Quaker movement, nearly every Quaker conviction can be traced to this basic tenet. Though this testimony creates a universal bond unhindered by physical proximity, Quakers believe truth can be most acutely experienced in a consistent, communal experience. Because of this, placing great educational value on cohorting makes the most sense in light of this Quaker testimony. In a similar manner, conversation, as defined by O’Brien, becomes an unavoidable outcome of practicing the testimony of equality. If one believes inherently that all people, in their entirety, are to be treated equally, there is no room for academic supremacy, intellectual hubris, or departmental superiority.

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Peace: Connection exemplifies this testimony as it seeks to link values with action. Peace, as a Quaker testimony, is recognized through the continual, practical outworking of internally held values. Peace is not fully realized until it is present on earth, and its presence on earth is made less likely if connections between values and practice are not pursued. One who seeks to live the testimony of peace, “must be a truth-seeker, always pursuing a comprehensive grasp of relevant facts, for spiritual truths grounded in misinformation lose their character and become platitudes or falsehoods” (or, perhaps, “half-truths?”).²⁴ Though instances of “connection” within higher education have recently increased through an emphasis on service learning, it seems a movement that values action as a significant indicator of belief should be at the forefront of such a movement.

While Thomas Hamm’s answer to the question, “What makes a Quaker college?” was that there was no consensus, there still may be a way forward. The general values upon which Quaker institutions were founded in the nineteenth century have not changed, and their truth is as relevant today as it will be for the next century and beyond. Indeed, most Quaker institutions eventually morphed into something different than what their founders intended, and today some are nearly indistinguishable from secular institutions. While decisions to move away from a Quaker heritage toward less distinctive identities has produced schools of great acclaim and notoriety, the current state of higher education has become value-neutral, and in turn the pursuit of truth has suffered.

This context provides fertile ground for the values and beliefs of the Quaker movement to once again forge a new and invigorating approach to an institution becoming increasingly indefinable. As was noted earlier, “Quaker ‘packaging’ is not a prerequisite for Quaker convictions to make a positive difference in the world.” Yet it would seem that the pursuit of Quaker values such as *truthfulness*, *simplicity*, *equality*, and *peace* may provide what seems to be missing in higher education today. These values, while not an end in themselves, are the means to that end which Christian higher education should strive—to learn how to be open to, recognize, and respond to that which is sacred, that which is true, that which is unmistakably of, from, and for God.

CONTINUING REFLECTIONS

As a Christ-centered Quaker living in New England, I am often greeted with skeptical glances and utterances of disbelief that such a thing exists. This is perhaps one of the most unique aspects of the Quaker movement—that the title “Quaker” can be used to identify, among other things, a Trinitarian and also a Unitarian. And here I take the risk of alienating those who fall under the Quaker umbrella and yet claim no belief in a triune God or a divinely inspired Bible.²⁵ These beliefs are implicit in what I have written above, and my argument hinges on these beliefs. Any refutation that begins with a different epistemology has the ability to set my argument up as just another straw man ripe for dismantling. I stand with Parker Palmer, who writes “the personal truth of Jesus is not divisive and discriminatory.” Therefore, one can argue for a unique truth rooted in the person and work of Jesus Christ while at the same time refraining from an “objectivist theology that aims at pushing or pulling all persons into doctrinal conformity or church membership.”²⁶

In light of this, what takes precedence is the actual pursuit of truth carried forth in relationship—realizing that truth is not necessarily found in the “fine points of theologies or in our organizational allegiances but in the quality of our relationships.”²⁷ Thus, it is paramount for Christian institutions of higher education to pursue the truth as though it is the single most important reason for existing as an institution, and to recognize that such a pursuit does not, and must not, exclude relational bonds. This pursuit of truth, though, is not merely one-dimensional. As Palmer explains the mutuality of truth, “I not only pursue truth but truth pursues me. I not only grasp truth but truth grasps me. I not only know truth, but truth knows me. Ultimately, I do not master truth but truth masters me.”²⁸ In this mutual relationship with truth my knowledge of the world and of myself expands so that I more fully know who I am and that for which I have been created. This truth, as defined biblically and historically among Friends, is uniquely found in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and revealed to all people through the work of the Holy Spirit. This spiritual approach to the truth must not be abandoned for any reason; it is an intractable aspect of Christian higher education.

Finally, the *radical inclusivity* of a Quaker pursuit of truth, based on the quest for truthfulness, simplicity, equality and peace, offers a unique and robust approach to Christian higher education that cannot be ignored. Where other religious ventures might come across as

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dividing true believers from the rest, a Quaker approach to education sees it as a deeply religious quest involving a radical invitation to pilgrimage. All are welcome on the journey, and all are invited to join in on the quest for truth, which indeed sets us free. As seen in *Founded by Friends*, a slippery slope exists between committed adherence to Quaker values and a quaint appreciation for them. Though there are many approaches to Christian higher education, a Quaker approach that emphasizes the importance of practicing truthfulness, simplicity, equality, and peace may be the very type of environment where we can “engage in that patient process of dialogue, consensus seeking, and personal transformation in which all parties subject themselves to the bonds of communal troth.”²⁹ This communal bond in the pursuit of truth, Christ’s truth, may be the very thing needed in order to not only withstand those forces that seek to distort the truth, but to create a thriving, educational community which may lack Quaker packaging, but be Quaker at the core. If that happens, Friends leadership in higher education might yet move from chopping block to the cutting edge of what is most needed in the world today.

ENDNOTES

- 1 John Oliver Jr., Charles L. Cherry, and Caroline L. Cherry, eds., *Founded by Friends: The Quaker Heritage of Fifteen American Colleges and Universities* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2007), xxi.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 William C. Ringenberg, *The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 58.
- 4 Thomas Hamm, in the introduction to *Founded by Friends*, 46.
- 5 Paul Lacey. *Growing Into Goodness: Essays on Quaker Education* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1998), 141.
- 6 James Turner, “Secularization and Sacralization: Speculations on Some Religious Origins of the Secular Humanities Curriculum, 1850-1900,” in George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield, eds. *The Secularization of the Academy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 75.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, 77.
- 10 Ringenberg, 114.
- 11 These influences created later growth that was far superior to other forms of higher education—from 1992-2002 enrollment at colleges and universities within the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) grew 67.3%, compared to 2.1% for all other schools.
- 12 Hamm, *Founded by Friends*, xxi.

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- 13 Paul Anderson's Epilogue, "An Ongoing Heritage," in Walter Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism*, (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1987), 260.
- 14 John Punshon, *Reasons for Hope: The Faith and Future of the Friends Church* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2001), 15.
- 15 Paul Lacey, *Growing Into Goodness*, 3.
- 16 Dennis O'Brien, *All the Essential Half-truths About Higher Education* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998).
- 17 O'Brien, 197-200.
- 18 Paul Lacey, *Growing into Goodness*, 57.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 155.
- 20 O'Brien, 194.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 197.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 198.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 199.
- 24 Lacey, *Growing into Goodness*, 77.
- 25 I respond here to some of the concerns expressed by Caroline Whitbeck in her response.
- 26 Parker J. Palmer. *To Know as We are Known: Education as Spiritual Journey* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 50.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Ibid.*, 59
- 29 *Ibid.*, 68.