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Questions About Quakerism

by
Alexander Purdy
QUESTIONS ABOUT QUAKERISM

It is my purpose to raise and briefly answer some of the many questions asked about the Quakers both by outsiders and insiders, non-Friends and members of the Society. I am, of course, speaking only for myself and not in any official capacity. I shall, however, try to present a Quaker consensus rather than special points of view.

1. Is it possible to summarize Quaker History in a few short sentences?

The answer is, Yes and No! No, for the three centuries of Quaker history are quite as complex as any other three centuries. The scores of Quaker histories and studies, increasing rather than diminishing in number, witness to this complexity. Yet some generalizations may be roughly accurate.

Quakerism had its rise in the 17th century; George Fox the founder was born in 1624: The 17th century was characterized by rapid growth of the movement over against intense persecution. Before the end of the century 50,000 were estimated to belong to the Quaker groups. It was a young people's movement with the naissant energy of a new and fresh discovery of truth. The formality and sterility of the established church in England and the existence of prepared groups ready and waiting for a vital religion provided the soil for this rapid growth.

The 18th century may be roughly and inaccurately called 'quietistic.' 'Persecution had taken its toll of the vigorous young leaders. The Quaker movement became in-
grown. This was a time of disownment for marrying "out of meeting," for withdrawal from the world, for emphasis on plain speech and dress, and for a "guarded education." A Friend—ones hopes not typical—could write in his diary: "This has been a year of some spiritual growth and I have ventured to add a quarter inch to the brim of my hat." With the Quaker emphasis on simplicity, rugged honesty and industry came prosperity and perhaps the accompanying cooling of missionary zeal.

Yet this quietistic temper amounting to repression, for example of the fine arts, was accompanied by deeds of mercy and love. Was the quietism which we tend to deplore actually the seed bed of the social testimonies of the Society?

The 19th century was characterized by the evangelical revival and its reaction against quietism. The study of the Bible, the rise of the First Day of School, of the Adult School in England and of the Pastoral movement in America were evidences of this new evangelical emphasis.

The 20th century has been marked by services of relief and reconstruction under the Friends Service Council and the American Friends Service Committee. We have witnessed an aroused interest in higher education, the founding of more than a hundred new Friends meetings, many of them in the vicinity of educational institutions, and many in the south and southwestern parts of the United States where Quakerism has no traditional background. The core of these new meetings is usually made up of Friends who have migrated from older centers in this day of shifting populations.

Another way of summarizing the three centuries, admittedly inaccurate but perhaps conveying a true emphasis—has been suggested by Hugh Doncaster in the Friends World News. I shall paraphrase rather than quote him. The 17th century stressed the historic Jesus and the living Christ of the Spirit, holding that the life of the one gave meaning and reality to the other. This creative tension was the source of the initial strength of Quakerism. The 18th century stressed the inner Christ of the Spirit and neglected the historic Jesus. The 19th century stressed the historic Jesus and neglected the inward Christ. Quakerism in both centuries tended to be one-sided and weak. The 20th century has a place for both but stresses neither and has the potential strength without yet achieving it.

II. What is distinctive about the Quaker message?

There are three main ways of conceiving religion: as an IDEA, as an EVENT, as an EXPERIENCE.

The great Greeks had the daring conviction that the human mind was made for truth and that it is the mind of man that lifts him above the beasts. This has been an incalculable boon to humanity. It is not surprising that many have conceived religion as an IDEA or a system of IDEAS, A THEOLOGY.

The Hebrews, on the other hand, conceived religion as a series of divine acts in history and man's response thereto. The early Christians accepted this conception holding that the definite act of God in history was the event of Christ, and the outcome of history would be linked with that event. This too has proved to be an incalculable boon to mankind making history meaningful and not just "a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury."

But Christianity is more than an IDEA and more than an EVENT; it is an EXPERIENCE. To be sure these are not mutually exclusive, but mutually interdependent. Without the idea religion degenerates into ignorance; without the event into unreality; without the experience it never lays hold of the man entire, thought, feeling and will. The Gosp-
pel of John, so dear to Friends, holds the three in climactic interrelationship; "In the beginning was the Word" - the creative, dynamic IDEA: "The Word became flesh" - the divine EVENT; "Abide in me and I in you" - the living EXPERIENCE. Without denying the significance of IDEA or EVENT Quakers have found the locus of authority to be inward. Friends today may aspire to be worthy of William James' famous characterization "Quakerism is a religion of veracity rooted in spiritual inwardness."

III. Are the Quakers Christian? Are they Protestant?

The Quaker conviction that God speaks directly to every man who has ears to hear without regard to race, color, status, or religion is a principle that stands above all historic religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity. But this principle found unique historic expression in the life and teaching, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The early Friends believed they were reviving primitive Christianity, and no recognized statement of Friends has ever questioned this. One is aware of the keen sense of need for a spiritual sanction above all divisive factors religious as well as political, economic and social. But Friends will contribute to this desired end by producing the fruit rather than by denying the root of their faith.

Douglas Steere has well said that there are four possible attitudes toward other world religions. (1) There is one and only one true religion, all others are false. This position is morally, spiritually and even Biblically indefensible, as Paul indicates in the report of his address at Athens. "He is not far from each one of us for 'in him we live and move and have our being.'" (2) A religion compounded from the best of all great religions. Baha'ism is an attempt to achieve this end. But it is sentimental and unreal to suppose that a world religion can be carpentered.

(3) Mutual coexistence. As in the political field this is, at best, a temporary solution. The most significant religions must be and are today deeply missionary. (4) Mutual irradiation. As men on opposite sides of a hill most surely come together by climbing and not by chasing each other around the base of the hill, so the great religions will be drawn closer as each devout believer is deeply true to the best and highest in his own faith.

Are the Quakers Protestant? Those whose answer is NO need to "read church history more attentively. The Reformation was not one monolithic movement but a rich and varied affirmation: Luther Calvin, the Anglican group, and the Sects made up of Baptists, Congregationalists, Mennonites, Quakers and others. While Quakerism has less in common with the major reformatory grouping it was closely allied in its beginnings with these sectarians and in this sense is certainly Protestant over against the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. I think the impulse to disassociation with Protestantism arises on the one hand from a sense of kinship with mystics of all faiths and of no special faith and on the other hand from a sense of kinship with all groups devoted to practical ways of service to humanity. But this again is a false emphasis on the fruit rather than on the root of Quakerism.

IV. Is Quakerism extreme individualism?

The most widely used American history textbook calls Friends "the extreme individualists of the Reformation" and another current book speaks of the "extreme individualism" of Fox's teaching. I suppose this amazing misunderstanding arises from the absence of a creed and of a fixed liturgy as forms of achieving community of thought and action. Many years ago I heard a leading Friend who should have known better say that the central belief of the Society was freedom of conscience. Now Friends have be-
lieved in freedom of conscience and have labored and suffered for this belief. But no society can be based on such a principle. Friends are gathered into a society as they find the enlightened conscience issuing in certain common testimonies. It was the Light, according to George Fox, that showed men their sin and their Savior and brought them into unity. The first Publishers of Truth believed in a unity deeper than notions, that is intellectual formulations. It is the faith of Friends that this kind of unity can alone stand the strains and stresses of human association, for this is a unity below the level of sociability and surface congeniality. It is a deep inward bond tough enough to endure in a world of tensions. It is this radical kind of unity which Friends seek in their meetings for worship and for business: the deep oneness of spirit even when intellectual agreement is not reached. The giving up of the vote with its inevitable division into a majority and minority in favor of the search for spiritual accord - this is indeed the exact opposite of individualism without suppression of any man's conviction. This radical search for unity calls for a radical reliance on tenderness and love in the faith that no human being should control decisions but only the great Head of the Church Himself. And this is why Friends call the presiding officer not President or Chairman but Clerk as the framer of decisions reached in the unity of love.

V. Is Pacifism an essential Quaker belief?

Would it not be more accurate to say that pacifism or as many would prefer to say the testimony for peace - many shun words ending in isms as too doctrinaire - issued from the central Quaker belief in the divine Life and Light? This is an historic testimony across the three centuries of our history. But perhaps Friends have been more concerned to give positive witness to the life "that takes away the occasion for war" than to argue for the pacifist position.

Friends do not regard pacifism as a creedal item; it is rather a witness springing from the Quaker faith that there is that of God in every man. The essential basis of membership is willingness, readiness, eagerness to seek for and to be obedient to the Light of Christ. I cannot imagine that anyone whose intention it is to alter the historic peace testimony of Friends would feel at home in or should be welcomed to the Society of Friends. I am, however, among those who would welcome into our Meetings those who while recognizing and approving the Quaker testimony for peace do not feel that they themselves can fully live out this testimony but who are open to divine leading here as elsewhere.

VI. What is the Quaker position as regards the sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's supper?

Like the Salvation Army, with whom Friends find themselves somewhat strangely associated in ecumenical gatherings on this point, Friends do not observe the sacraments outwardly. We hold that baptism with water was a rite administered by John the Baptist and that John foretold and Jesus fulfilled a Baptism of the Spirit, the inward superceding the outward and that communion with the Lord is the fulfillment and realization of Jesus' words: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them."

In common with a considerable number of non-Quaker scholars I hold that both Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ecclesiastical rather than dominical in origin. The Jesus of history is not recorded to have spoken a single word about baptism with water: Similarly while the Gospels all record a last supper of Jesus with his disciples - a simple and beautifully symbolic sharing of common food as a seal of their fellowship in the shadow of the cross - no one of them according to the best texts, contains the words commanding a
repetition as a ceremonial. It is worth noting that both the Revised Standard Version and the New English Bible - both uninfluenced by Quaker bias - omit the words "this do in remembrance of me" found only in later manuscripts of Luke. It is Paul alone (I Cor. 11:23-25) who has the command to repeat and it is Paul's record which controls the usual celebration of the Lord's Supper. One may add that the sacramental issue so central and divisive in the modern ecumenical situation is today less heated so far as Quakers are concerned than was the case in my youth. My honored predecessor as Dean of the Hartford Theological Seminary, the late Tertius VanDyke used to say when inviting the worshippers to participate in the Lord's Supper, "And if there are those present who, like members of the Society of Friends do not use the outward symbols, we welcome them also to communion with our Lord and his disciples."

VII. Why have Friends pioneered in humanitarian service? Are not the Friends really a fellowship of service rather than a religious body?

The Quakers probably best known for their social pioneering, for their protest against war, slavery, social injustice, discrimination on the basis of color, race, sex, economic status, their initiative in prison reform, the care of the mentally ill, their testimony for a single price and for honesty in business dealings. Are they not, then, to be regarded as social reformers rather than religious leaders? The answer, as every Friend knows, is perfectly clear. The worth of every human being regardless of heredity or environment or any external condition depends basically, Friends believe, on the human capacity for the divine Light to shine in him and the divine seed to grow in him. Friends do not proceed from either a sentimental or a realistic view of man but from the faith that the Light does shine, however dimly, and the divine Voice does speak whenever the human ear is attentive and the human will obedient. Early Friends visited the Pope, the Tzar, the Sultan, the American Indian on missions that will seem to the sociologist chimerical, fantastic, visionary. That their motive was purely religious is abundantly evidenced by such encounters. They held that there was "that of God in every man" and that if one could speak in love to the divine potential a response might come.

It should be added that the Quaker contribution to democracy springs from the same religious source. Their refusal to give "hat honor" to so-called superiors. Their insistence upon using the singular pronouns "thee" and "thou" instead of the plural "you" even to magistrates and kings involved a painful witness in the 17th century. Their clear-eyed appraisal of the might among men as made of the common stuff of humanity was no "levelling" or doctrinaire position. It was rooted like all the Quaker testimonies in their central religious conviction.

This genius for taking hold of the small ends of great problems has never quite been lost even in our own day. Friends have always held that the individual person under a sense of divine leading must obey that leading undismayed by the size and complexity of modern problems. The visit of Friends to Hitler, even though they never quite reached him, was in obedience to the same inward prompting.

The responsibility laid upon each member of our Society by the very absence of a separated body of clergy ought today to motivate us in witnessing in the whole round of our common life to the "divine possibility in every human actuality."

VIII. Are the Quakers a society of mystics?

The word mysticism is a slippery, fuzzy word, an omnibus word carrying a variety of meanings. Rufus Jones
IX. Why do the Friends not grow in numbers?

We are a tiny group and we have not kept pace with the growth of population; an insignificant and inconsiderable Society from the standpoint of numbers. There are many answers to this question and I have nothing new to add except to plead for one immediate step which I believe ought to be taken and this I shall develop as I close this address.

May I say first of all that I do not regard the mere survival of our Society for three centuries as too significant. Institutions have a way of surviving long after they have served their original purpose. They get organized into the structure of society holding lands, buildings and funds with a bureaucracy of officials, boards, committees and the like, interested in the perpetuation of the institution. One hopes that our Society has a minimum of organization but that organization exists and no doubt must exist few would deny.

From the beginning Friends have been more concerned with the proclamation of Truth than with the attempt to add numbers to their fellowship. That the influence of Friends is wider than their numbers would suggest is the testimony of many religious leaders but this is something for others to say and not for Friends to rely on.

Has much of the Quaker message been taken up by other Christian groups? No doubt, and this may account for Quaker self-consciousness so apparent in our large and smaller gatherings where the query, What is the Quaker message, is discussed again and again. At this point we will do well to consider what others say about us. One who has been thrown with non-Friends in intimate relationships, as has been my own lot for almost forty years, has no question as to the contribution Friends have yet to make to the common Christian cause. Many of the leaders of the ecu-
menical movement prize the Quaker message and urge us to be faithful to it. This we ought to do without intolerance. A Friend recently in attendance at a Roman Catholic wedding was genuinely moved by the high moment of the Mass - like Friends the Roman Catholics hold that marriage should be celebrated in a sacramental context. When the bell rang at the elevation of elements, marking the miracle of transsubstantiation when the wafer and wine became the body and blood of Christ, my friend was conscious of deep unity with the dramatic presentation of the interpenetration of the divine and the human, even while he found the priestcraft, the liturgy, the ecclesiasticism completely alien to his own feeling and thinking. An appreciation of the ways of others in worship ought to inform and motivate our Quaker message, not negate it.

A recent interpreter of Quakerism holds that Friends increased in numbers almost miraculously in the first period because that was "the day of our visitation"; ours was an Idea whose time had come. He infers that this is not such a time. He may be right, of course, but we will do well not to blame the Almighty for our own failure to give our message forcefully and effectively in our day.

Friends, as others point out, have been predominantly a rural and small town people at any rate in the larger areas of the United States. The urbanization of America has not been conducive to the growth of Friends, it is suggested. There may be some truth in this although this is a problem for all the churches and by no means for Friends alone.

For all of fifty years I can remember occasions such as conferences and Yearly Meeting sessions when the call has been sounded to a more fervent and glowing faith, to the yielding of Friends to the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit as the remedy for our weakness. This belongs, I

fear, to what has been called "the very true." Unless we can implement our emotional experiences to practical ways of outreach they are wasted if not actually harmful. It is "very true" as has recently been pointed out that we need converted Friends even more than just convinced Friends; that is, Friends whose whole lives and not just their intellects are engaged in the mission and committed to give the message of Quakerism. The Pentecostal experience issuing in a planned and strategic mission carried out in the centers of the Mediterranean world ought to teach us that conviction and conversion should illuminate not stifle the exercise of all our powers of reaching men and society with our message.

And so I call Friends to a deepening concern for OUT-REACH - the older and good word was EVANGELISM now too narrowly defined by some. If and when Friends Meetings from the grass-roots level can share with one another what is being done to touch and influence folk outside the familiar and dear group gathered from Sunday to Sunday, a new thrill of life and power might well sweep through our Society. English Friends have been ahead of us here. The London FRIEND reports experiments with radio, television, and newspaper advertisements. Not all such experiments will be successful and some will not seem consonant with our testimonies. We will do well, however, to study again the "threshing meetings" of early Friends and to seek for their modern equivalents.