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TOWARD JUSTICE: QUAKER INFLUENCES IN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY—A RESPONSE

EMMA LAPSANSKY-WERNER

Sometimes history can buttress and reveal “self-evident truths.” One of those self-evident truths is that the thirst for justice is as hard-wired into us humans as is the quest for food, water, warmth, physical safety, and community. From Hammurabi to Caesar, from the Magna Carta to the Israeli constitution, the thread of that search for justice meanders in its own tangled ways, from early history into our own time.

In these papers that address some of the Quaker contributions to American democracy, that thread stands out boldly. Beginning with William Penn’s seventeenth-century Frame of Government for Pennsylvania, Quaker notions of civil society have tried to articulate the principle that, given a just and unsullied environment, all humans can be trusted to help discern God’s laws, God’s goals for communities, God’s justice. These scholars’ discourse about the insinuation of that principle into the fabric of American democratic government offers us a rich opportunity for re-examining that thread.

Through the lens of the diverse peoples who populated early Pennsylvania, Stephen Angell invites us to explore the workings of William Penn’s quest for justice, as Penn designed his “Holy Experiment/Experience” in the English New World. Arguing that George Washington was right on target when he described Pennsylvania as “the general receptacle of foreigners from all countries and all descriptions...[who are allowed to] take an active part in the politics of the state,” Angell believes that Penn reveled in the fact that his colony was probably “the most diverse of the thirteen English colonies.” To buttress his case, Angell introduces us to four groups that peopled Pennsylvania, with their differing language, culture, and economics—English Quakers, Germans, Scots-Irish, and Lenape Indians. Any inhabitant, Penn decreed, who acknowledged “one Almighty and Eternal God” and agreed to “live peaceably and justly in Civil Society,” would be entitled to individual freedom of “Religious Perswasion [sic] or Practice.”

Ideas and heroes come and go. Perhaps because Penn died in debt, or perhaps in response to the misuse of power and abandonment of justice on the part of his sons, Pennsylvania's founder, and his ideas, fell out of favor. Even the mid-twentieth-century establishment of the United Nations—the realization an idea early expressed by William Penn in his blueprint for international justice—failed to elevate Penn to national hero status. Perhaps it should have.

But good ideas cannot long be suppressed, and justice/democracy keep cropping up, albeit sometimes with the talons of imperialism unsheathed. Indeed, both William Penn *and* his sons were among many Europeans who have sought to control new lands, in the name of teaching "heathens" how to exercise western-style democracy. Angell reminds us that often we mere humans do not get it right: often our attempts at democracy are myopic at best, tyrannical at worst. Yet, as some Philadelphia Quaker citizens demonstrated in their 1688 anti-slavery petition, no community ever seems to stop cogitating on the question of justice for very long. One of the strengths of Angell's essay is his linkage between early Friends and the communities of today's Quakers. He reminds us that the questions of engaging diverse ideas, when encountering real-life crises, are ever-fresh in Quaker communities; that Quaker witness is as vibrant today as it was in the seventeenth century.

What has long marked Quakers in the parade of justice-seekers is the Friends' central tenet of pacifism, the refusal to resort to violence to bring about justice—in fact the insistence that violence is *incompatible* with justice. But what, then, do we do with conflict? Without the use of force, how is justice to be protected from those who would threaten it? How can truth-seeking idealists protect their communities and influence the course of events to move toward the "self-evident truth" of the value of the fairness that is surely God's law? Consideration of that problem brings us to Jane Calvert's contribution to the discourse.

Civil disobedience, emerging as it does from the presupposition of the importance of non-violence and witnessing to the truth, presupposes the values of negotiation and persistence. "A public, non-violent, submissive violation of law as a form of protest," Calvert tells us, as civil disobedience is the voice of "the conscience of a nation." This is a good definition, and one of the strengths of Calvert's argument is that she makes clear her key terms—civil disobedience, *synteresis*, and "withdrawers from politics." With this last term, she

draws us into the existing discourse on her subject, i.e., where have Quakers been in American politics. This is the thing Calvert does brilliantly (and that one might wish that Angell had done more.) Clearly identifying the arguments of her intellectual sparring partners, Calvert offers us a provocatively alternative interpretation. Early Quakers developed the strategy of civil disobedience, Calvert argues, not to “withdraw” from politics, (as historian Gary Wills has suggested), but rather to achieve “a more intimate engagement” with the political arena. Nonviolent negotiation—what Angell calls “fashioning political unity”—requires patience with the vagaries of humans, faith in divine guidance, and deep trust that ultimately the body politic can create an environment where citizens will not mis-hear God’s law, or introduce bad human-made laws. Calvert supports her argument by suggesting that John Woolman, who possessed this patience and faith, eventually had his anti-slavery ideas embraced by his Quaker peers. Interestingly, Benjamin Lay, who employed finger-pointing and grand-standing to make the same case, was disowned.

Calvert sets the ideas on motion, calling on us to consider how civil disobedience can “facilitate democratic deliberation” and asking that we re-consider Quakers’ seeming passivity. Comparing early Friends to the modern-day resister, Martin Luther King, Jr., Calvert describes passive-resistance-law-breaking as an act in pursuit of the public good. But the tone and focus of Calvert’s article presents an apparent disconnection between early Quakers and the modern world. It is as if Calvert falls prey to the common misconception that Quakers are all dead, their ideas frozen in time in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But in fact Quakers are very much alive in the present day, still grappling with the implications of faith in the modern world. After all, the oldest and among the most persistent religious lobbies on Capitol Hill is the Friends Council on National Legislation (FCNL). And, the modern-day American Friends Service Committee struggles so hard with its attempt to remain in touch with the contemporary world that the effort sometimes leaves the AFSC rife with internal tension.

There are numerous tendrils trailing off the edges of Angell’s story, and it would be fascinating to pursue some of them. What about Penn’s murky relationship with the African Americans in his world? At the end of his life he freed his black slave, Yaff, but only on the condition that Yaff must not return to America. Also, what can we learn from investigating the Swedes who preceded Penn, but who

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also had to negotiate the new ruler? Angell notes, in passing, that the Lenape had a quite different notion from Penn about the elements of the land contract they were negotiating with the English proprietor. Future discussions might also further engage that aspect of social “diversity,” and some of the language barriers to social justice. The Haverford College Quaker Collection holds a 1701 treaty between Penn and some representatives of the Lenape. A very official-looking document it is, with formal wax seals, and “X” marks as “signatures” of Indians who could not write their names in English symbols! But Angell reminds us of the chasm of understanding between the Indians’ tradition “use” of common land and the English notion of *exclusive* possession of *individual* land. And by mentioning the distinction between “tolerance” for diversity and “inclusion” of diverse ways of life, Angell points us toward some issues that challenges Friends in our own time: how to remain true to Quaker ideals while embracing others of God’s creatures who have differing versions of (or paths to) God’s messages? How should Friends handle the fact that Quaker ways sometimes seem to put others at risk?

These papers have mostly focused on a small slice of time, a narrow geographic area, and the ideas of a precious religious community. However, the issues raised here are both timeless and geographically unbounded. The implication of Angell’s argument is, indeed, a “self-evident truth”: that good government must somehow face and grapple with diversity, because humanity, in its essence, is diverse. Calvert reminds us that justice, civil disagreement and negotiation, legal protection, and the challenge of “differentness” are enduring aspects of the human condition.