The World As Influenced by Quaker Convictions

Paul N. Anderson

George Fox University, panderso@georgefox.edu

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The world as influenced by Quaker convictions

By PAUL ANDERSON, GFC
FOR THE GRAPHIC

This week George Fox College hosts its 20th annual Quaker Heritage Week, exploring the topic, "Quakers and Business." Internationally known guest speakers John Punshon and David Hurst will make presentations, along with others at various times from Sunday through Wednesday.

Of special interest to the public will be a panel discussion Monday evening (7:30 in the Hoover Lecture Hall) on the topic "Quakers and the Professions" (involving presentations by Hurst, Punshon and four George Fox professors), a major multimedia presentation by Hurst on Tuesday evening (7:30 in the Hoover Lecture Hall) on the theme of his latest book, "Crisis and Renewal," and Punshon's chapel addresses on Monday and Wednesday (10 a.m. in Bauman Auditorium).

The reason for choosing the theme is simple. Like many other religious groups, Quakers have influenced the fields of business and other professions far beyond their numbers, but the facts remain largely unnoticed. The reader may know, for instance, of a Quaker presence in the Newberg area, but many will not be familiar with Quaker connections to root beer, the industrial revolution, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Columbia Gorge Highway.

In his book, Hurst says that even though Quakers never represented more than 1 percent of the population, "they were able to make one of the largest contributions of any religious denomination to the English industrial revolution." He also points out that Quakers are represented as "Fellows" in the British Royal Societies by a ratio "over forty times what one would have expected from their presence in the general population."

Why has this been so? Hurst believes it has to do with the ways Quakers have "lived" their values. They have always been open to change, have believed that all have access to the truth, and have sought to provide alternatives to the norm, making the world a better place. According to Hurst, Quaker pioneers in the industrial revolution provided modern organizations with an excellent set of models for how to turn crisis into renewal and challenge into success.

Despite Quakers numbering only 350,000 worldwide and 100,000 in the United States, their influence has continued to be felt in business and beyond. For instance, Quakers were among the first to set a fixed price for goods in England. Rather than charge a higher price to some within a barter system, Quakers in the 17th century began setting a fair price and asking no more than that. As a result, these merchants became trusted, and their businesses did well.

Ironically, because Quakers refused to consent to the creational requirements of Oxford, Cambridge and other universities, they were excluded from higher education. Nevertheless, they became founders of some of the first practical trade schools. They also set up effective systems of internships so that even the poor could become well trained and self-sustaining.

Out of a concern that an education should be provided to any who wished to learn, Joseph Lancaster opened the doors of a primary school in London (1801) and within a few weeks had hundreds of students. Because he could not supply enough adult teachers, students were trained to teach each other. From these explorations, the tutored system of education emerged, and the vision of education for all caught on in the British Isles.

In fact, some of the finest preparatory schools in England and America were started by Quakers. To this day, Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C., continues to be an example of Quakers in education serving children of presidents and local residents interested in learning. George Fox College is just one of 16 Quaker institutions of higher education in America, and these have significantly influenced America's leadership. Woodrow Wilson had been president of Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania before becoming the president of the United States, and Newberg's own Herbert Hoover was one of the earliest alumni of Pacific Academy, which later became George Fox College.

Quakers have made very significant contributions in social reform. Anthony Bennezet and John Woolman influenced significantly the abolition of the slave trade in England during the 18th century. They also helped to exit the Quakers from the slave trade in America. A number of Quaker abolitionists include John Greenleaf Whittier and Levi Coffin, called "the engineer of the Underground Railroad." Nearly 20,000 slaves were helped to their freedom in Canada by Coffin and other Friends before the Emancipation Proclamation.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s college mentor, Howard Thurman, was a Quaker, and he encouraged King to pursue graduate studies in Boston and to stand for the truth. Gandhi cooperated a great deal with Quakers and stayed at Woodbrooke, a Quaker study center, when he was in London.

Susan B. Anthony stood for women's suffrage in America, Elizabeth Fry instituted many prison reforms in England and America, and Esther Tuke (along with her husband, William) developed "The Retreat" (1796), the first treatment center for the mentally ill in England — all examples of Quaker women who have felt called to make a difference in the world for good.

A Philadelphia Quaker, concerned over needless drunkenness in the wharf area, invented an alternative drink made from roots. While "root beer" did not catch on, "root beer" did. His name was Charles Hires.

As an alternative to addictive substances, Quakers developed the chocolate industry. Fry's, Cadbury's, Rowntree's and Hershey's are all names of Quaker families who sought to do good — and did well. It is said that at a wedding between members of two of the Quaker chocolate families, one of the most prized gifts was a chocolate recipe! We're sure they had cocoa at the reception.

Aside from these anecdotes, Quaker innovators have contributed to discovering the smallpox vaccine, antiseptic medicines, and the atom, and to developing antibacterial soaps, and steel production, early railroad systems, early banking and insurance industries, precision watch making, fine lenses for scientific uses, and interchangeable parts for farming machinery, among other things.

The American democratic system was highly influenced by the Quaker ethos in the colonies, and Quakers have received the Nobel Peace Prize several times, individually and collectively. Sam Hill, architect of the Columbia Gorge Highway, and M. Lowell Edwards, co-inventor of the heart valve (another alumnus of George Fox College), also were Quakers.

Similar contributions of people of faith from other religious groups could certainly be narrated, and within a pluralistic culture, treatment of faith concerns is always a delicate matter. The point of all this isn't to glorify what Quakers have done. Rather, it's to document the fact that one's convictions do make a difference in the real world, and to illustrate how members of at least one particular group have sought to be effective stewards of those convictions.

Paul Anderson is an associate professor of biblical and Quaker studies at George Fox College.