1-1-2003

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THE CALL OF TRUTH—
THE PEACE TESTIMONY
DURING A TIME OF TERROR

ANN K. RIGGS

In my e-mail in-box recently was a message from the editor of Quaker Religious Thought. The editor noted that he knew I was busy with a large number of pressing matters. He knew that I had had to put off writing something for his use in the periodical several times. But he urged consideration of a call of Truth upon me, asking me to make time to put to paper some thoughts on our Quaker Peace Testimony because of its timeliness during the present time of terrorism. As I worked on finalizing this paper, I did hear Truth calling to me through his words.

Soon after this interchange I was headed off to a meeting away from my office—my office, which is located on Capitol Hill in Washington—across the street from the Congress and across another street from the Supreme Court. There the signs of an edgy militarism and a background of uneasiness about the possibilities of unforeseeable dangers and of closely related fears of an invasion into the private lives of citizens are all around me. In our neighborhood, assault weapons on the street corner mean that some very high-ranking executive branch or foreign official is expected in the Senate offices across the other street onto which my window looks out, the building where the Anthrax letters were delivered. Each day as I walk up the Hill, I simply assume that I am being videotaped. Might even religious liberty, a freedom that Friends were so instrumental in leading others to see as a gift from God, that civil society is called to honor and protect, potentially be under threat?

I was headed away from this environment for a meeting in another city. On the airplane I observed a young man in military uniform. He was an attractive man: serious in his demeanor, but not off-putting, fresh and young. I observed a young male flight attendant on his way past stop for a brief moment, shake this soldier’s hand, learn that the young soldier was on his way back to Iraq, and say, “Thank you,” before moving on to continue his work responsibilities.
new situations in the outpouring of historical change, new applications of God’s Truth are called for. Of course, we need to be wary of “new understandings of Truth,” as claims to new revelation often run the risk of involving error, being untested by time, but this is not to say that God’s eternal will is not understood in fresh and fuller ways. A classic expression of these two dimensions of what Friends mean by “continuing revelation” can be found in the classic quotation from Rufus Jones found in the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting’s Faith and Practice:

If God ever spoke, He is still speaking. If He has ever been in mutual and reciprocal communication with the persons He has made, He is still a communicating God as eager as ever to have listening and receptive souls. If there is something of His image and superscription in our inmost structure and being, we ought to expect a continuous revelation of His will and purpose through the ages. . . . He is the Great I am, not a Great He Was.4

Observing the interchange of these two earnest young men on the plane and believing in our Peace Testimony, one might wish that they would be touched by a fresh experience of God’s Truth, which would lead them to see the world and their place in it differently.

THE PARABLE OF PENN AND FOX ON THE WEARING OF SWORD

A classic example of this approach to seeing the young men on my flight in this perspective is an application to them of the often referenced, but probably apocryphal, parable of the interchange between George Fox and William Penn on Penn’s wearing a sword. In the oral tradition we learn of a meeting between these two soon after Penn’s convincement as a Friend. He encountered Fox and asked him about the convention of wearing swords. In the parable, Fox advises Penn to wear his sword as long as he can. The next time the two meet, Penn is without his sword and Fox asks him about this. Penn is reputed to have answered that he had taken Fox’s advice and had worn his sword as long as he could.

This is a deeply loved story among Friends, and for many Friends it serves as a powerful example of how gently we are to treat one another in our mutual encouragement of growth in the Truth. Yet
THE CALL OF TRUTH

Among the core Quaker understandings is a conviction that Truth comes from beyond the limits of our human language and concepts. Truth is transcendent. We seek to discern it. We work at becoming less limited in our capacity to apprehend it. We commit ourselves to inquiry, to seeking. In the end, what we can know of Truth is conditioned by our own limits as humans. Truth is more than we can know in full or can articulate in words or thoughts.

Yet, we can and do know Truth, in part, but truly. We see as in a mirror, “dimly,” not yet “face-to-face,” but we do see. We do not know as we “have been fully known” by God, but we do “know only in part” (NRSV 1 Cor. 13:12).

God has not left Godself without a witness in the world. “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Romans 1:20). God’s self-witness is accommodated to our limits of apprehension and understanding in the Light that is made known to us both outwardly, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and inwardly. In our relationship to God’s unlimited revelation of Truth, the Holy Spirit aids us. In the Spirit, we can attend to what otherwise we miss (Cf. I Cor 12:3).

CONTINUING REVELATION

One way to think of the call of Truth is to think of the traditional Quaker idea of God’s “continuing revelation” of Truth. One aspect of what our living oral tradition means by the concept of “continuing revelation” puts emphasis on “revelation.” We believe that God’s revelation is experienced by those who are open to it, with the freshness of a firsthand experience of Truth. Many have come before us, and the Bible and its weighty interpreters speak with special authority. Living within our tradition, in contact with Scripture and the records of the spiritual journeys of others, we learn from the experiences of God, of Truth, from others. But we are privileged to have our own revelatory experiences, as well, encountering God’s Truth for the first time.

A second dimension of the concept of “continuing revelation” within our oral tradition puts emphasis on “continuing.” As the believing community and the believing individuals find themselves in
beyond constraint to violence, but it does so in support of law, of justice, of meeting some human needs and with the intention of limiting injury to others and promoting public good. It takes a location between wearing a sword and not wearing a sword, we might say. It puts limits and conditions to the wearing of swords. Carrying within it a presupposition against violence, the Just War theory is in many ways an ally of Friends and other pacifists who wish to affirm the maintenance of order, justice and the rule of law.

THE CONCEPT OF SUBLATION AND THE CALL OF TRUTH

In *Method in Theology*, Bernard Lonergan introduces the concept of sublation. In his definition of the term, “what sublates goes beyond what is sublated, introduces something new and distinct, puts everything on a new basis, yet so far from interfering with the sublated or destroying it, on the contrary needs it, includes it, preserves all its proper features and properties, and carries them forward to a fuller realization within a richer context.” Here what is “sublated” is more than, is better than, what it sublates. But it is also respectful, if one may put it that way, of what has come before.

This concept of sublation offers a potential way to imagine the processes that would need to occur to take Penn from his social location as a sword wearer to the new location of someone who does not wear a sword. The concept is thus workable within the Society of Friends and our parables and oral tradition. It is a useful concept in thinking about our struggles with the Peace Testimony in the face of specific threats to our physical safety and to our civil liberties.

The concept of sublation as a way to see the relationship between offers a way to look at others outside the tradition as well, however. I would suggest that it is particularly useful for viewing the relationship between the Just War theory and the Peace Testimony. Returning to the example of the earnest young men on the airplane, the soldier and the grateful flight attendant, one may see its applicability. One can see also its compatibility with a Quaker understanding of the call of Truth.

Looking at the young soldier and his willingness to endanger himself, to expose himself to the possibilities of damage to his own inner well-being that may arise from engaging in violence, his engagement in activity to protect justice, the rule of law, public good and civil liberties, and his moral earnestness and looking at the gratitude of the young
difficulties can arise as soon as we try to apply this Quaker parable to those outside the Religious Society of Friends and to the complex situations of lived experiences in which evil is in fact disrupting the well being of others and the common good. Too easily it connotes compromise, when it really offers a more nuanced approach to conviction.

Penn was asking Fox for aid in being a better Friend. They agreed on the goal of the hoped for growth in Truth. But how are we to think about situations in which what we hope for in others is consistent with our own beliefs, but contrary to theirs? Without careful handling, the story of Penn and Fox cannot give us a theological and ethical foundation for valuing others as they understand themselves if what they value is different from what we value. We can be left only able to value others to the extent that they become more like we are or to the extent that we see them as bearers of potential to be less as they themselves wish to be and more as we would wish them to become. Surely this is not what “answering that of God” in others is intended to mean.

Further, the parable only refers to the taking away of the sword. Sword carrying is replaced by non-sword carrying. It tells us nothing of the processes in between the beginning and the end points. And in many life situations there is much that is more subtle, more nuanced and more difficult to assess. The present day *Faith and Practice* of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting gets at some of the difficulties and complexities in its discussion of Friends view of the state:

The attitude of Friends toward the state is conditioned by the fact that the state has many facets. As a necessary instrument for meeting human needs and for maintaining an orderly society with justice under law for all, the state commands respect and cooperation. But when the state acts as a coercive agency resorting to violence, it acts contrary to Quaker principles.

Friends are not opposed to all forms of physical constraint. It is sometimes necessary and proper for peace officers to use minimal forms of physical constraints in dealing with persons who do injury to others or who will not cooperate with just laws. But Friends must be watchful for the use of either physical or psychological violence in maintaining public order.5

The Just War and the Just War theory would seem to be prime examples of this kind of complexity. The theory permits movement
3. Ibid., 151.
flight attendant, I can see values I, we as Friends, share with them. Seeing these shared values, it is possible to see others, understand and value them as they see and understand themselves within the terms of their own values.

Utilizing the concept of sublation it is possible for me, for us, at the same time to fully affirm a Quaker understanding of the truth of the Peace Testimony. Seeing in this manner, it is possible to affirm all that is good in the Just War theory and those who live it firmly and at the same time claim that we are to live “in the virtue of that life and power that [take] away the occasion of all wars.” 7 The Peace Testimony so understood is a sublation of the Just War theory, not a rejection of it. The Peace Testimony “introduces something new and distinct, puts everything on a new basis, yet so far from interfering with” the Just War theory “or destroying it, on the contrary needs it, includes it, preserves all its proper features and properties, and carries them forward to a fuller realization within a richer context.”8

With this view it is possible to explain the sense of wonder I had observing those two young men, believers in the justice of the war in Iraq. It is possible to perceive that what I responded to was a call of Truth, without thereby denying the Truth of our Testimony and its claim on us.

The present time of terror and military activity is difficult for all. It makes profound demands on those who believe the Iraq war and its subsequent occupation to be just. It makes other profound demands on those who believe this war to be unjust and those who seek to firmly follow the Quaker Peace Testimony. These times do not require us, however, to lose contact with others, to relinquish a shared sense of common values and a common community with those who see the present situation differently from the way we otherwise might. In these times, Truth calls us to perceive more. It calls us to witness to the Truth we have received, while at the same time being patient enough to listen for the Truth among those who are also trying to diminish violence and make the world a safer place.

NOTES

1. The outline of this paper was presented informally at the Toronto Quaker Theological Discussion Group meetings in November 2002.

all men and women—not merely peace in our time but peace for all time.³

But then, Kennedy continued, “I speak of peace because of the new face of war.” The face of war, however, has even changed since President Kennedy spoke those words four decades ago. We no longer face mutually assured destruction by two Superpowers. The “new face of war” is civil strife, ethnic conflict, violence visited by states on their own people, and terror directed against innocents—typified most tragically by the recent genocidal wars of central Africa. These are the issues peacemakers face now; but how do we carry out the Christian mandate to be peacemakers among the new faces of war that address us in the world today? I would like to comment on four current and prevalent modes of peacemaking seen against the context of civil war and genocide in Rwanda, and thus evaluate the prospects of making peace in this violent age.

CONTEMPORARY MODES OF PEACEMAKING

Let it burn! There are those who claim that peace is unnatural, that war is inevitable and that, in the natural order of things, “God is day and night, war and peace, surfeit and hunger...all things are born through strife.”⁴ Or, in a more modern rendition, “Man is being towards death.”⁵ Political analysts like Luttwak argue that war is inevitable, and that we best let local wars burn themselves out.⁶ Scholars like Huntington project an inevitable “war between civilizations” the “West against the rest.”⁷ Historians like Victor Davis Hanson, Donald Kagan and Robert Kaplan join in suggesting that the ancients had it right in their embrace of war, and that the best way to deal with conflict is to let them burn themselves out.⁸

In Rwanda, the purport of such argumentation was to suggest that Hutu and Tutsi were savage tribes who had fought each other for years. War between them was purportedly inevitable—why not just let them have it out? This view, however, is inadequate. For one thing, Tutsi and Hutu were not perpetually hostile groups, but rather, they lived in a fairly stable social and economic symbiosis for several centuries. Granted, there had been battles between royal armies from the center against overlords at the periphery, but conflict might just as easily have been directed against Tutsi or Hutu chiefs within their own tribes. There is no historic referent for the mass