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# ON FAITH

JOHN MILLER

I APPRECIATE THE OPPORTUNITY TO RESPOND to the intriguing article by Friend Read, “On the Nature and Centrality of the Concept of ‘Practice’ among Quakers.”

I take Read’s basic thesis to be this: Faith has essentially no formative significance for Quakers; instead, we form ourselves as a people around waiting in silence during worship, other things being derivative from this practice. The article focuses our attention on the unprogrammed tradition, and being from this tradition myself, I will respond with it in mind.

The central question this thesis raises is whether in fact it is possible to practice seriously the spiritual discipline of silence outside the context of faith. Friend Read thinks so; I think not.

As Read’s article uses it, the term faith seems restricted to belief in creeds or something close to that. As a defining concept of faith, this fits neither my own experience in unprogrammed worship nor my understanding of what contemporary Christian theologians generally mean by it. Before I can engage Friend Read’s thesis, therefore, I must expand the understanding of this key term to include the realities I see it actually encompassing in religious life. Otherwise, when we talk about what is special about Quaker silent worship we may make claims that miss the mark.<sup>1</sup>

In my experience, faith comes into existence in the intersection between my Encounter with God and my Story. I seek to understand the Encounter in the light of my Story, and this understanding produces one dimension of faith; we often call it religious belief. I seek to live out my Story in the light of the Encounter, and this provides the other dimension of faith; we often call it trust in God.<sup>2</sup> When Quakers speak of being guided by the Inward Light of Christ, they speak of this same intersection; following the Inward Light is an activity of faith that involves both belief and trust.<sup>3</sup>

The elements in this description are important.

There is the Encounter with God.<sup>4</sup> In it I meet the Thou of my life that is also the Thou of the universe. When this Encounter occurs, as

in the context of a Gathered Meeting, I can only say, “Yes! You are the One I love! Speak to me! Show me the Way to live!”

In terms of the broader ecumenical context of Christian tradition, Encounters happen in many contexts: while singing a hymn, meditating on scripture, listening to someone pour out their heart, hearing a sermon, celebrating the Eucharist, and many others. Friends traditionally have felt the Encounter—often calling it Presence—while waiting in silence.

And then the Encounter is gone, and I must think and speak about its meaning and truth. I must try to live in its light.

How do I do this?

Again, I have no choice but to use the images and ideas that have come to me out of the past of my Story. I am a human being, an enculturated creature, a soul who understands himself in terms of events already happened and those anticipated.

My story is a particular one.

I was born in 1938 and grew up in North Carolina. I studied and received a degree in applied mathematics, and then went off to study theology. I discovered Quakers and joined the Society. I waited in the silence and experienced the Encounter. I served on the Peace Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. I taught philosophy. I taught and am teaching theology. I waited in the silence; I sought to understand the Encounter. I taught comparative religion for a decade and a half, and discovered that meditation on Sufi stories in silent waiting was profound hermeneutics; I discovered that Barclay had discovered the same thing about scripture long before me; I rejoiced. I practiced it with Matthew and with the letters of Paul, and God’s spirit spoke directly to me through those ancient writings. Encounter. I taught the Gospel of Matthew to a group of men and women; we discovered the way Jesus crossed the boundaries set by cultures and offered God’s grace and liberation to the oppressed. We discovered Jesus doing that today. I waited in the silence. I had a vision of Jesus coming to me in a time of despair; he took from around his neck a wooden cross held by a leather thong and placed it around mine. I wept with joy.

Everybody’s story is particular.

Perhaps the things that happened to me were random events and illusions that had no meaning. But I do not experience them that way. Instead I experience my story as one among others in a larger, meaning-

ful drama. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.... Behold, the blind see and the lame walk.... I am alpha and omega.”

When I was a kid, many of my friends told the story “the South shall rise again.” Others told the story of how America saved the world from Nazism and later when they were older told how America was saving the world from Communism. These were big stories in which people found the meaning of their own little stories. They were stories in which people tried to find faith; they said, God is in these stories; God is on our side.

But, of course, America is not God, and living as if it were comes from a confusion of spirits. Such confusion conjures human actions for human ends into divine action for divine ends; then people believe the gods they have conjured will save them. These gods become holy, and people can even kill for them.

I say nothing new.

Why do we do this?

Because we want and need a story of God. Without the story of God, the Holy Thou in our lives, our little stories fall into meaninglessness and eventually disappear into nothing. Our friends die; the social customs and structures we cherished die; we know we will die. We forget who we are. We want something that will tell us who we are, something that will live on. Only God lives on. So we seek the story of God as the story of our own lives too.

Wherever there is an encounter with the holy in a story, there the human story loses itself in a divine story, but sometimes the holy is malevolent. I remember newsreel scenes of women crying with joy and stretching out their hands to Hitler as he passed in parade; they encountered the holy, but a demonic holy.

How do we discern the difference? Jesus tells us, we shall know them by their fruits. I believe this. I’ve seen it confirmed over and over. We can also discern it in the silence, when it is practiced rightly, but even here only the fruits will finally confirm it. The spirit of the crowd can invade even a Quaker Meeting and deceive those sitting and waiting. I’ve seen it happen. This is difficult business, and we need help in the process.

Why do I speak of Jesus? Why not someone else? Because he is the central dimension of my past and my future, because the redemption that the story of Jesus reveals is the kind I yearn for, because Jesus has

met me in the silence at the crossroads of my life and saved me too. Because I have discovered my illusions with the help of him and those others who also are his disciples. Because my memory of his story and his continuing Presence in my life helps me discern the spirits. There is more to this than just me.

My point here is that the meaning of the Encounter will come from the larger Sacred Story that each person brings to the Waiting in silence.

So what do we make of a Quaker Meeting in which the people gathered claim diverse stories with images in them that perhaps conflict with each other. Think of examples. A man cannot pray through the image of a Father God, because his own father, drunk, beat him with a leather belt over and over for back talk, all the while telling him that God would send him to hell for not honoring his father; he's a refugee among Quakers. A woman has found Zazen, and the ball that appears in her throat as she meditates on "what is the sound of one hand clapping" grows red hot. A Jew says, please don't speak to me of the Messiah. A woman weeps, because when her husband abandoned her, Jesus touched her and gave her hope that she could cross the boundaries of the Patriarchy and give her child a good life.

The problem here is that these people actually have different larger Sacred Stories. They can sit in silence with each other. They can listen to the stories of each other and empathize with these stories. They can feel inwardly they have discovered great ranges of human reality they did not know before. And they can praise the wonderful silence they have with each other.

What they cannot do is grow together in a common Sacred Story. No one here has anyone else to listen to them and give guidance. The Jew can affirm the Zennist, but cannot listen her into greater depth; she has not the depth in Zen faith to do it. The Zennist cannot listen the man struggling with the image of God into a depth understanding of his Thou; she has not the depth in biblical faith to do it. And so on. Everyone is caught at preliminary stages of spiritual growth. In the fullest human and religious sense, there is no community here.

For the Zen Buddhist to grow, she must—and I emphasize this word—become seriously involved in the tradition and practice of Zen. Bodhisattvas and Masters and Meditation Halls must become her communal reality. Otherwise she will only have what the Masters call *bompu Zen*, a superficial relief from life's troubles, but not a genuine *satori* and not enlightenment. The Zen Buddhist needs the Story of

Zen and the faith that lets her appropriate that larger Sacred Story so she can grow as a bodhisattva.

And so also for the Jew and the Christians. Each needs a communal Sacred Story that feeds them at a level deeper than their own thoughts and imaginings.

Can Friends wait in silence without faith? I think I have answered that question.

What then makes a Friend a Friend?

It is Encountering the Thou of life in the context of the Quaker Story and the traditions of that story that trustworthily inform us of how to live out that Encounter. Without the biblical tradition and its special revelatory formations in the tradition of Fox, Fry, Barclay, Gurney, Jones, and many others, without the seasoned Friends whose decades of responding to the Inward Light of Christ as they waited in silence, without the faith, in a word, of the Religious Society of Friends, the silence is simply a relief from a busy world. It is not yet following the Inward Light.

Such relief has a value, but only a temporary one.

## NOTES

1. In my understanding of faith, I have been influenced most by my experience as a Quaker, but beyond that I have found permanent help in my thinking from the writings of Barclay, Brinton, Buber, H. Richard Niebuhr, Tillich (with some major qualifications), McFague, Suchocki and other process theologians, and the general concerns of narrative theology, which I largely share.
2. Theology is thus my attempt to expose the truth and meaning of this Encounter with God in the context of my Story.
3. Alternative but similarly broad understandings of faith are present over a wide range of theologies, for example, in those that depend heavily on biblical traditions, such as Ted Peters, *God—the World's Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 23-29, and in phenomenological theologies, such as Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), and in phenomenological descriptions of religion that aim at a universal perspective, such as Frederick Streng, *Understanding Religious Life*, Third Edition (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1985), pp. 35-38.
4. I prefer the word "God"; others may use "Ultimate Reality" or "The Absolute" or "Holy Presence" or "The One" or "Being Itself" or "The Act Of To-Be" or any one of several other terms from the theological tradition. Ultimately, what terms we choose are important for our theology, but we will have to ignore this for the current discussion.