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Letters

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Letters

To the Editor:

My attention has been drawn to a wide-ranging letter from R. W. Tucker of Philadelphia about "un-Quaker" Quaker schools which appeared in *Quaker Religious Thought*, Vol. XII, No. 2.

The letter refers at one point to our school and contains certain errors of fact. We were not "the last private school in Washington to integrate" nor were we the first. We did not integrate as early as some Friends think we should have. We currently have the second highest percentage of blacks of any private school in the area — 10.4%.

We have some diplomatic and political families among our parents and probably some military families, too, and it would be surprising if we didn't, given the nature of Washington. We feel we are fortunate to have such a diverse school community.

Since we are said to "cater" to such families, may I quote from our admissions brochure sent to all prospective parents:

We recognize the value of a coeducational student body that includes a variety of economic, cultural, and racial backgrounds. We give special consideration to qualified candidates who are members of the Society of Friends, brothers or sisters of present or former students, and children of alumni and faculty.

I can assure R. W. Tucker that school admissions is such a complicated, hard, and pressurized business that if we gave the slightest inkling of "catering" to anyone we'd be in deep trouble and deservedly so.

*Robert L. Smith, Headmaster
The Sidwell Friends School
Washington, D. C.*

To the Editor:

Vail Palmer, in the course of his over-kind remarks about John Yungblut's essay on Teilhard de Chardin (*Quaker Religious Thought*, Vol. XII, No. 3), credited me with the term "reconstructionism" as describing the approach to Quaker identity pioneered by Lewis Benson. Vail Palmer then used the term a number of times.

Some clarifying comments are in order.

First, I did not coin this word. I first heard it used by Canby Jones at the Quaker Theological Discussion Group conference at Barnesville in 1960. Whether he coined it or got it somewhere else, I have never known.

You may wonder why I did not credit Canby Jones when I used it in "Revolutionary Faithfulness" (*QRT*, Vol. IX, No. 2). The answer is, I tried. I detest footnotes, but I did want to put in a paragraph of explicit acknowledgments in which this term would have been given its proper attribution. However, this paragraph would have been in the form of an expression of gratitude mainly to Canby Jones and to John McCandless. Canby was editor and John was printer and both were in a position to veto the whole thing, and they did, before I ever composed it. In fact, I still feel a bit trampled-upon.

As to the term itself, it has about two syllables too many, but it is the best word I have run into for describing a general approach shared by many of the writers in *Quaker Religious Thought*. Its meaning is fairly self-evident and it has the merit of not connoting any traditional Quaker faction. But I believe we can usefully give it a more exact definition.

Originally, as Canby Jones used it, "reconstructionism" was simply the attempt to reconstruct, for our understanding, the original understanding that early Friends had of themselves. As such, it stood in opposition to the universal-mysticism approach to Quaker history invented by Rufus Jones and his associates on the one hand; and to the Protestantizing approach on the other hand, historically identified with Joseph John Gurney and currently identified with such names as Geoffrey Nuttall and Maurice Creasey.

Today that use of the term is, in my opinion, dated. Reconstructionism, simply as an exercise in historical scholarship, has swept the field and exploded other views, and most Quaker scholars accept its basic arguments. Those who still think in other terms are left-overs, still around but essentially to be ignored.

What we have instead is, at one extreme, Friends who accept Lewis Benson's essential views of what original Quakerism was (with various differences in emphasis) but go on to say, "So what?" Or, as Henry Cadbury put it more carefully in an early issue of *QRT*, "Why should this be normative for Friends today?" And at the other extreme we have Friends to whom it is normative. Now they know the Truth, and they see their task as going forth and doing likewise. The obvious label for Friends of this type is "primitivist," though Edmund Goerke has coined the word "restorationist" and if they prefer that word, by all means let us grant it to them.

I propose, then, that we define the "reconstructionist" as someone who accepts the new scholarship; who further agrees that Quakerism throughout most of its history has changed not in response to its own starting place or out of its own roots, but in response to outside doctrinal tendencies; and who is seriously engaged in asking, and trying to answer, the question: "Where should we be today, if we had evolved normally out of our own roots, keeping the essential insights of the first Friends and reapplying them in each generation?"

This suggested definition is far from narrow, as the briefest inspection of files of *QRT* will readily reveal. Starting with general agreement on what original Quakerism really was, and asking what it ought to be now in terms of the essential original insights, can lead to a great many answers and a good deal of argument. Which original insights really were essential and in what sense? Exactly how are they to be applied today? Granting that we want to grow out of our own essence, can we nevertheless learn from other religious traditions; and if so, which ones, and what? We all come up with different replies. Reconstructionism is not a position, it is a process — a very vigorous process.

But here is where the action is, not only theologically but in terms of new understandings of Quaker lifestyle, Quaker witness, Quaker organization. I for one am interested in colloquy with Friends who are reconstructionists in this specific sense of the word, in the reconstruction not of a past viewpoint as a historical exhibit but in a vital reconstructed Quakerism for today, and I just don't see wasting time or effort, or pages in *QRT*, on the unreconstructed.

R. W. Tucker
Philadelphia, Penna.

To the Editor:

I have read and reread the Spring 1970 issue (Vol. XII, No. 2) with great interest since it deals with the great Quaker belief in "that of God in every man," a common, fundamental principle, binding all parts of the Religious Society of Friends together, however much we tend to differ on the details of ministry, form of worship and ideas of the Christ. Lewis Benson's long article gives his interpretation of George Fox's meaning in his preaching and writings on "that of God in every man," which is contrasted to the current understanding which largely stems from the prolific and dynamic writings of Rufus M. Jones. The crux of the matter, to Lewis Benson, seems to be that Fox considered "that of God" to be not a part of man inherently, but a quality dependent upon a conversion experience or some outside influence, suddenly or gradually, giving to man a heavenly quality, changing his life and making him then totally committed and aware of his relationship to God.

Rufus Jones powerfully revived this glorious concept through his long study of mysticism and psychology and Quaker history by emphasizing that man had this great gift of "that of God" in him from birth, as an inherent, latent potential, not physically to be dissected, but a dependable quality that can be "reached" and educated (led out), brought to bloom in the ordinary man who may have had no schooling or environmental influences toward this maximum human achievement. This actual possibility has given rise to the significant Quaker attitude and work in education, missions, service, and all philanthropic endeavors, beginning with the first Quakers and governing their successors for more than 300 years.

I'm sure we all owe a great debt to Rufus Jones for his lifetime work and successful public ministry, enunciating and exemplifying his strong and much needed emphasis on man's God-given potential of goodness while at the same time acknowledging his terrible, animal instincts. Evolution is a fact, mighty and mysterious, but no less so than man's inherent capacity to overcome evil with good and to leap over the walls of sin and error, using the power and direction which God has so lovingly bestowed on him.

Let us not quarrel with hair-splitting discussions as to when and how this great gift is given. How silently, how surely, it is given in Bethlehem and New York and Jerusalem and Moscow! The great question is how to perceive and nur-

ture it in ourselves and other unlikely men. It takes fortitude and discipline and faith. Whether we are taught by George Fox or Rufus Jones or a "hippie dissenter," let us cling to that "one invincible surmise" that there is "that of God" in every man that cometh into the world from the great "beyond" and travels over the world for a brief time, answering that of God with Joy.

I wish your paper could be more positive and simple, as well as educational, to enliven Friends and enlighten the world in its hour of doubt and continuous search for Truth and Hope.

*Elizabeth Furnas Jones
Media, Penna.*