Religious Experience and Religious Thought --

AN EDITORIAL

This is the fifth issue of Quaker Religious Thought, a venture in publication which started as a venture of faith. Members of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group believed that many Friends and their friends would be interested in exploring the intellectual foundations of Quakerism, and although there was no assurance of sufficient financial support the venture was begun. The results abundantly justify the faith, for the demand for copies of each issue has been very gratifying and works of enduring value have been written. Furthermore, this magazine has had the virtue of being a means of expression for the various branches of Friends in this country since a conscious effort is made to bring to bear varieties of viewpoint upon each problem. British Friends also have added greatly to this endeavor. It has seemed appropriate as this publication got underway to center its first studies upon historical themes, and such themes will continue to occupy much of our attention. In this editorial, however, I wish to depart from this particular emphasis in order to examine a theme of considerable contemporary interest among us, namely: What is the relation between religious experience and religious thought (or theology)?

This question is of particular interest to Friends just because we make a point of emphasizing the experiential nature of our religious practices. All Friends are acquainted with George Fox's statement of his conversion experience. He wrote in his Journal that after a period spent in utter misery he at last heard a voice which said, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition." He ends his account of this life-determining experience with the statement, "And this I knew experimentally." All Friends, in the liberal Quaker tradition at least (and it is to these in particular that this editorial is directed), know also that this emphasis upon the "experimental" nature of our Quakerism has been one of our identifying marks over three centuries. In our preoccupation with experience we often like to point out that our religion is not a "notional" one, that theological beliefs and creeds are secondary to experience for us, and that we believe our lives should be God-centered and not...
creed-centered. That is, many of us stress the special emphases found in Quakerism to the extent of denying or of treating as unimportant the more formal aspects of historic Christianity, both creedral and institutional.

Quakerism did begin in an emphasis upon experience and continued with another teaching given by George Fox which held that true Christianity consists in being a member of the Christian community within which the inward Christ is heard and obeyed as head of that community. This thought continues the emphasis upon experience for, as Maurice Creasy pointed out in his article, early Friends thought of Christ under three aspects but they emphasized the third of these. The three were: first, Christ in his pre-historical aspect; second, as he appeared in history in Palestine; and, third and most important, as he is now to be known within spiritual experience. The question asked of professing Christians was not whether they accepted certain creeds or followed certain ecclesiastical practices but, rather, “Have you heard God’s voice?” “Does Christ speak among you?” “Have you the same Spirit that the prophets and Christ had?” Thus, early Quakerism may best be classified as experiential or spiritual Christianity.

It is true also that because of this emphasis upon immediate, present experience a certain depreciation of formal theological belief appeared. This is probably best explained by saying not that Friends rejected religious understandings but, rather, that these were assumed to be valid yet felt to be secondary to the inward and the personal. Whatever the reason may be, both the creedral and the historical aspects of religion became inevitably less significant among Friends than they continued to be in other Christian groups.

Movement in this negative direction has reached a peak in some of our contemporary Friends’ meetings in which religious thought is regarded with a vague yet strong suspicion. Theology, which is the systematized form of religious thought, is sometimes dismissed out of hand as though obviously not only unimportant but positively dangerous to the spiritual life. Some persons feel that thought and the formal aspects of religion are cold and unspiritual substitutes for the warm, authoritative immediacy of religious experience itself. Spiritual daddards may need such props as substitutes for experience but we do not! Possibly not many Friends would speak as strongly as this, yet the atmosphere of such ideas clings to many of our discussions. It may at times be questioned whether those Friends who feel so strong an opposition to religious thought have considered carefully just what it is they are opposing. It cannot be that they believe one should not think about God, Christ, the nature of man, or salvation. It may be that they are opposing, quite validly, two misuses or misunderstandings of theology but in doing so throw out the baby with the bathwater. Sometimes, theological thought is taken in such a way as to e mm to deny any importance to spiritual religion today because of a seemingly exclusive emphasis upon what happened ages ago, especially in the life of Jesus. When this extreme emphasis appears it must be opposed in the name of vital religion.

A second cause of misunderstanding may be that some Friends identify all religious thought with a particular creed or particular theological system. What is forgotten or overlooked is the fact that there can be theological thought that is unified, yet not expressed in terms of a dogmatic system, but rather as that which catches up the truths learned by our forebears and interprets the experiences of the present. We believe that there can be no significant religious experience without thought.

RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN RELATION TO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

It must be stated clearly that if and when theology becomes an end in itself—when true religion is identified with a system of theological beliefs—then religion has truly lost its life. Much as the scientific formulation of laws in biology is not life itself but an abstraction from life, so too theological formulation is an abstraction from religious experience and is not religion itself. It attempts to express in the best thought of the day the intellectual understanding of the nature and significance of religious living. There is value and even necessity for doing this, just as long as one keeps clearly in mind the fact that these are formulations pointing to mystery beyond the mind of man and are not themselves religion. A menu is an abstraction of a meal, quite inedible and unhealthful, yet menus do have some value. So too it is not theology, important as that is, but Christians would say, discipleship and obedience that make religion. To illustrate the point once again, the description of gravitational attraction is a very different matter from a falling object, and the description of a rose is not at all the same thing as the concrete, beautiful flower itself. The distinction between the experiential and the abstraction, between religion and its formulations, should not be lost.

True as it is that theology may not replace the Spirit, it is equally true that religious experience cannot do without religious thought. This point is not so evident as the former, hence it requires more careful discussion. Frederick Tritton, the British Friend, has remarked that every kind of experience is more than simply the observation of events and facts. Our experience, he maintains, is what we do with what happens; it is the meaning of the events. To understand this point, let us re-
turn to the illustration of a rose. The basic experiences of the senses with a rose are those of a certain form, color, and odor. These are the raw material, so to speak, of our experience, but they are only its starting point. What we actually do with the raw material of this experience is to relate it by thought and word to others of our former experiences. This rose, we think, is more delicate and pleasing in shape and form than some other flowers; its color is not as dark red as a carnation. Thus we think about what we have seen and felt and by this mental relating we are able to understand the rose and retain our impression of it in a way we otherwise could not. This is particularly true when we put into words, and especially written words, what the rose was like and its meaning to us as we responded to it in delight and appreciation. Should we express this as poetry, then when we reread our poem we might to a considerable degree recall the original experience and possibly even recover something of our sense of joy as well. That is to say, the raw experience by itself is evanescent and hardly meaningful until it is put into thought and words which relate it to the rest of our human experience. It is in this relating by thought that we come to understand and appreciate fully the experience. Experiences about which we do not think remain vague combinations of impressions which are essentially meaningless. This leads us to the conclusion that experience without thought and words is blind, vague, and quite without significance. On the other hand, we have said, words and formulations without experience are likely to be abstract and lifeless—counters (like chessmen) to be pushed about and made into a game of the intellect unrelated to life. Basic experience (or raw experience) thus receives its meaning in and through thought, while for thought to be related creatively to life, experience is needed to give it starting point and content.

Let us now turn to the meaning of the foregoing for religious experience. If we try to imagine a religious experience in its immediate state, apart from interpretation and relationship to the rest of our experience, what is its actual nature? Although we cannot avoid using words here, we might try as best we can to avoid interpretation by saying simply that the experience is one of joy, uplift of spirit, loss of depression, awe, or a feeling of increase of being. If we stopped at this point, what possible value would such experience have for life? Not very much, in all truth. Its value for life appears in what we do with what has come to us, in the meaning of these inner states. The religious experience is actually fairly meaningless until we relate it to our whole understanding of life and in this relating interpret it and give it wider perspective, incorporating it into the web of our life. In doing this, religious thought which leads toward theology plays an essential part.

As we understand that religious thought, and particularly theological creeds or systems, are not themselves religious experience but are rather attempts to formulate such experience, how then ought we to evaluate this thought or these systems? We would suggest that such creeds must not be taken literally, for they always point to mysteries that cannot be contained within human vocabulary. They had better be regarded as essentially akin to poetry in purpose although not in form, for poetry, as we have noticed, communicates not only the nature of an experience but also its meaning. The Nicene Creed and the doctrine of the Trinity, this implies, should be read not as abstract description but rather as appreciation—the former of the meaning of Christ; the latter of the depth of being of God.

**THEOLOGY AS RESULTING FROM RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

All valid religious thought has its roots in past religious experience, of individuals and of groups. The experiencer sought to find words by which he could understand (in terms of his other experiences and understandings of life) what had happened to him. He had to do this, we are maintaining, before the experience could become meaningful. The words and ideas he used were, necessarily, derived from his culture, in which he participated. It could not be otherwise. When Moses experienced the burning bush, for instance, his understanding of what had taken place was naturally one rooted in the general religious concepts of his day. However, this does not mean that one may not find validly new insights which rise above the general concepts; every prophet and spiritual leader does gain such creative insight. It does mean, however, that the experience arises from the kind of religion in which it is found and is interpreted in terms congenial to that religion. The great prophets, for example, built upon the Yahwehism of their day and did not depart fundamentally from it. Jesus built upon the faith of Israel of his time. We repeat that the religious experience which comes to sensitive souls is inevitably given its interpretation and meaning within the general framework of understanding in which the experience takes place. The mystics illustrate the point also.

Those poetic souls (if we may call them such) who received these experiences were more interested in conveying their meaning than in giving descriptions of their inner feelings. Less important for Moses (or Jesus) than attempting any description of God who had spoken to him was his sense of the significance of the occurrence. He had been called to perform the
function of a prophet—to call the Hebrew people to a destiny that would in time make of them a great people under God. This meaning became Moses’ message to Pharaoh and the Hebrews. As the Hebrews accepted this message and acted upon it their understanding (that is, the content of their religious thought) developed. They came to believe that Yahweh was a covenant-making God who had chosen them as his people. He was seen to be awesome and jealous, yet also faithful and trustworthy, righteous and merciful. Thus, through the experience first of Moses and then of the Hebrews, their theology developed, conserving what was felt to be essential in those experiences and providing a foundation for later thought and experience. It is valid to say that without Moses and the later prophets there could have been no historical Jesus.

Religious thought that conserves the past and prepares the way for the future. Much as the principles of science conserve the discoveries of the past and make possible the new, and more complete and precise, discoveries of the future, so do theologies that are taken as living formulations of experience conserve the past and lead on to the future. And just as foolish as would be those scientists who would destroy all that the past preserves for them in the name of fresh discovery are those people who would throw out what two thousand years of Christian thought and a thousand and more years of earlier Hebrew thought present to us as foundation for our fresh, new discoveries and their meanings. In both instances the result would be not gain, but inestimable loss.

THEOLOGY AS DEFENDER FROM ERROR

Religious thought is not only conserver of the past and guide into the future, but is also our guard against error. It provides us with the vast treasures of understanding derived from the best of human thought and experience over the millennia of years. When the insights it has won with such great effort are discarded, we are exposed without defense to the strongest and most vocal concepts of our culture—ideas with shallow roots and little to recommend them many times except their vigor and novelty. We then exchange the wealth of the past for flashy and superficial opinions of the present. Let us examine a few illustrations of this point. As one result of the emphases of the Enlightenment, a period which might be dated as starting about 1700, man has been considered basically good, ready to respond with goodwill to reasonable presentation of truth. This has led to a highly optimistic view of man, as Wilmer Cooper was at pains to show, and one which we have now come to see was mistakes in its emphases. Those who acted upon this view, whether in family, community, or nation, were acting upon an understanding which fails to do full justice to the fact that man is swayed by factors other than reason and that he is a mixture of the good and the evil. Christian theology, followed by George Fox and Quaker thought, knew that this was true. Man is “made in the image of God” but is also a “sinner,” rebelling against his own creator and acting against his fellow man. Efforts directed toward helping our fellow men are unrealistic and ultimately will be vitiated if we think all men basically good. Christian theology would have guarded us from such an error, product of a relatively short period of philosophical thought. Let us take a second example. If we assume that the “Inner Light” is a native spark of divinity in every man, part of his “native equipment,” we are in effect claiming that all good lies within ourselves and that what has been called of old the “grace of God” is not necessary for us. Believing this, we will surely miss the path of the life of the spirit, for our true good, as theology tells us, lies not in ourselves but in God, and only as we approach him in the spirit of self-denial do we find deliverance. Meaningful religious experience comes to us, not from ourselves but as a gift to the waiting, dedicated soul. Again, theology in its ancient wisdom delivers us from error of thought and of mistaken practice. A third instance has to do with many of us believing that the most important need of man is economic betterment. This idea, with that degree of truth which does adhere there, is another modern one, derived from an economic interpretation of man. It comes as something of a shock to those who have helped improve men economically that their good deeds have not solved problems of greed, anger, pride, and listlessness. Since all that we do from day to day depends upon our attitudes and values and these in turn depend upon how we see and understand life, it follows that as theology does embody insight into truth derived from vast experience in the past it acts as guardian to keep us from wandering into those partial truths and those untruths about life which appear temporarily in every generation.

EARLY FRIENDS AND THEOLOGY

Although some Friends have claimed that early Quakers had no theology, it seems clear from the articles published in issues of this magazine that there was a very definite explicit theology in the thinking of George Fox. No one can question that Fox developed a theology which informed Friends for well over two centuries and is once again beginning to receive the kind of attention it deserves. The great discovery
of Friends was not something totally disconnected in their own thinking from Christian understandings, and comprehended and taught by them as a new form of religion. Rather, they claimed to have discovered in their own experience the living center of Christianity. As they turned to the Christian Scriptures they found, to their joy, that in them the same Spirit which they knew experimentally was expressing himself. Hence the Scriptures spoke to them livingly and freshly.

The center of their religious life was, then, their own experience, but this experience was rooted and grounded in the Christian past: it drew light upon that past, and was interpreted by it, even while it added new elements of insight and understanding. Newness of life and freshness of insight, coming through personal experience, made the Christian past one with their own experience. Here was a freshness of Christian experience which these Friends believed to be the true Christianity. Once again the Light of Christ became, as for Paul, the director of their lives, giving them conviction, power, unity, and the ability to bring to life the Seed in other seekers as well. In such a fashion as this did they describe what had happened to them. In their experience and religious understanding came into unity, making for a vital movement among men, as a union of this kind always does. Not a vague, unrooted, orphaned mysticism, on the one hand, nor abstract creedalism on the other, but religious experiences and commitment joined to historic religious understandings which gave these experiences their meaning—these together were early Quakerism.

**Religious Thought in Our Day**

We are saying that when religious experience and religious thought are separated vital religion ceases to exist. Those Friends today who emphasize the "Quaker silence" are very likely to have a largely empty silence if they disconnect it from its Christian foundations. The kind of religious experience that rises from it will be of a very vague kind, incapable of forming a virile religious community or of sustaining our historic Quaker testimonies. The loss of religious thought leaves us with no foundation upon which such experiences as we may have can be interpreted and assimilated: with no expectation in worship or understanding of the meaning of what has moved within us. Having divested ourselves of the great treasures of theology we are, as it were, beginners starting aresh, amateurs of the spirit, having to spy out the land anew, without landmarks. Christian thought, on the other hand, informs us what the nature of ultimate reality is, what we ourselves are and where to look for regeneration, and it sets up our goal in life.

Within Quaker life there is much implicit theology, but this holds unsuspected dangers, as we have already suggested, just because it is present without being recognized and hence without being examined clearly or related logically to our other understandings. In our use of terms like Inward Light, the Fatherhood of God, and the brotherhood of man we are using implicit theological ideas, for it is surely not rationally demonstrable that God's light dwells in men, nor that all men are truly brothers of each other. The very form of silent worship also carries theological implications. These ideas and others as well may be the last vestiges of earlier Quaker theology as it has been affected by later rationalistic thought. The result is one of vast weakness, for we are weak not only in thought but also in experience, and more to the point, perhaps, as we look to the future, there can be no great outburst of experience in years to come without a foundation of thought sufficient to bear it.

In conclusion, I am saying that religious thought has its legitimate and necessary place, but that this is a place which it may not overstep. It cannot replace spiritual experience but is, rather, the preserver of the meaning of such experience. It may not take the place of works, for these are the expression of the responsibilities laid upon the indicated Christian. The purpose of this Editorial is not to ask Friends to adopt wholesale the theological baggage of the past two millenia. Its purpose is, rather, to beg us not to neglect the treasures of those two thousand years of experience and thought. I believe that as we combine our search for God through prayer and worship with immersion in Christian thought, making that thought our own, we may then begin to experience anew in this our day the strong movement of the Spirit that will establish our community anew. We may then be able to echo, with George Fox, the words, "There is one, even Christ Jesus" who has spoken to our conditions, and this we may then know experimentally.

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