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Comments on "The Kingdom of Light"

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Comments

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Arthur Roberts's creative paper has given us a new dimension to consider in our discussion of "Sin, Perfection, and the Faithful Community." Faithfulness requires, as Arthur says, "a return to wholeness . . . in respect to the understanding of divine revelation." We need to recognize and use each of the modes of knowing God available to us as human beings.

The major argument of this paper is that "faithfulness arises from the infusion of the divine into and through the material." The sensory and rational modes of knowing God are as significant as the intuitive approach. The Quaker tradition has often stressed the intuitive and neglected the sensory and rational. Arthur argues that we need to restore a balance in the ways we know and experience God if we wish to be faithful.

I appreciate this outline of the epistemological implications of the Christian doctrines of the incarnation and creation. I agree that Friends have tended to stress the intuitive mode of knowing and given only brief attention to the sensory and rational ways in which God speaks and reveals his will to us. We especially need to be reminded that God speaks in and through our everyday lives as well as in special times of "intuitive" prayer and worship.

I particularly enjoyed thinking about Arthur's geographical model. I have had fun trying to determine on which continent I live and where I spend my two week vacation. It is instructive to analyze different streams of Christian tradition according to the model.

The task of a good paper is to raise questions and provoke deeper thought. The job of a commentator is to focus a few questions for discussion. Let me share some of the reflections and questions which came to my mind as I read and heard the paper. The questions fall into three areas: (1) a question

of Quaker historical theology, (2) the definitions involved in that most rugged of continents, the intuitive, and (3) the ways we might apply Arthur's model as individuals and communities.

(1) Arthur indicates that early Friends did not understand the paired terms of light-darkness, inward-outward, and holy-carnal in a gnostic way which separated their spiritual meaning from their phenomenal character. He quotes two passages from George Fox which reinforce the Christian understandings of incarnation and creation.

I hope that Arthur is correct in his interpretation of the Quaker tradition. However, I am unsure. Fox is probably the most balanced of writers on this question. But Isaac Pennington's christology, particularly on the topic of the incarnation, is definitely gnostic. Friends did not follow Pennington on this specific point. But I wonder whether Friends did inherit an ambiguity on the role of the sensory as a revealer of the divine, an ambiguity which caused problems in the later divisions (Keithian, Hicksite-Orthodox) and makes Arthur's paper necessary today.

(2) Of the three continents in the model, the intuitive is the most fascinating and bewildering. My mind returns to it repeatedly because of the wealth of elements included in its mountains and valleys. The distinction between this mode of knowing and the other two is clear. However, there is a lack of clarity about the constituent elements of this continent. I doubt that extrasensory perception, ecstasy, and dreaming are identical modes of knowing. For example, ESP, in so far as this phenomenon has been analyzed, does not necessarily use the language of images, symbols, and myth which is found in dreaming. Nor is dreaming necessarily related to ecstasy. If these modes of knowing are diverse, then we should take care not to obscure the differences. The paper argues that each mode of knowing is open to its own temptations and misuse. Therefore, faithfulness demands that we recognize the distinctions.

I also question the prominence of the term ecstasy as a definition of the intuitive mode of knowing. The term is probably meant to convey a state of immediate awareness of

the holy. Friends have spoken about this experience of the Light having the power to uncover sin, to transform, and to lead to righteousness. But the term ecstasy does not necessarily entail these qualities. Rather it denotes a state of overwhelming emotion or a state beyond reason or self-control. In Quaker tradition, great emotion may or may not accompany the experience of God's power in one's life. But emotion itself is not the definitive element of the experience. To use the word ecstasy as a definition of the intuitive category promotes the emotional to a higher position than most Friends would wish. Thereby the intuitive is seen as more self-centered, open to misuse, and divorced from faithful living than is consistent with Friends' experience.

It is correct to be suspicious of any religion which simply promotes a series of spiritual highs. Faithfulness demands action in the hard work of day-to-day living. But it is also important to recognize that activity is subject to just as much self-centeredness as is experience. A religion which is only a means to do good works is as off-center as a religion whose aim is a spiritual high. Being in relationship with Christ and following Christ's will are intimately linked with one another. We must be careful not to portray the intuitive category as providing more opportunity for misuse than other modes of knowing.

(3) Finally, how should we use this model to help us become more faithful as individuals and as Meetings? The paper does not give us many specific applications.

What, for example, are its implications for worship? Many religious traditions do not separate the intuitive from the sensory or rational in worship as much as Friends have. The Roman Catholics use a highly developed liturgy recognizing the sensory modes of sight, hearing, smell, and even taste. The high point of the Mass is the celebration of the Eucharist where Christ becomes present in the bread and the wine. Hasidic Jews experience God in the recitation and reading of the Torah, a fusion of the rational and intuitive.

Should this model prompt Friends to rethink the place of the sensory and rational in worship? Does it imply a role for

the sacraments? How do we evaluate the modes of knowing in worship?

Arthur insightfully recognizes that glossolalia and silent worship may have a common dimension in transcending the rational. He discusses the danger of such worship. But surely there is also a place for transcending the rational. How do we determine that place? Of course, worshippers in an unprogrammed Meeting may concentrate not on the silence but on the openness for messages. In this case there may be a fusion of the intuitive and rational modes of knowing.

In the area of daily living there are questions as well. To restore the sensory mode of knowing might mean to recognize that we know God through a good meal. But how do we discern the place for fasting? Christ may be found in married life. But some Christian traditions have long recognized the calling to celibacy for some individuals. Christ is found in creation and through our cultural forms. But Christ also transcends creation and culture. Each tradition chooses those areas where it emphasizes Christ in culture and creation and where it stresses Christ transcending culture and creation.

How do we discern what God is calling us to do? To be human is to be particular. We cannot embody all values all the time. A Pendle Hill student recently told me of a predicament she faced when attending an NAACP anniversary banquet, wearing clothing she found suitable for her Quaker testimony to simplicity. She realized her elegantly-dressed black friends felt she had not honored the occasion sufficiently with her simple attire. She wondered how she could both dress simply and still use clothing in a way to honor special gala occasions. Indeed, some modes of living can be blended. But we cannot adhere to simplicity and elegance at the same time. We cannot ordinarily be committed to both marriage and celibacy. How does this model help our discernment process? What other elements are necessary to make discernment possible?

Arthur Roberts's paper calls us to beware of one-sidedness and the failure to hear God in all the ways he speaks to us. But we are left with the difficult task of discerning what faithful knowing means in our lives. As in other areas of life,

discernment requires a faithful listening and willingness to surrender ourselves to God's will. It also requires further serious thinking about the implications of faithful knowing for our lives.