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## Response

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# Response

RUTH M. PITMAN

Larry Kuening's comments on my paper are organized as an invitation to Friends who are dissatisfied with the absence of Christian standards and the lack of accountability in the Society to come out and join a community with a "real discipline." Although I share Larry's separatist sympathies and am no less critical than he of Friends who opt for compromising unity, we dare not overlook the fact that the problems posed by separation are indeed grave. Let me only suggest that one approach to them might be -- if the militant pacifists will forgive me -- a comparison with the theory of "the just war." But to respond to Larry by discussing the moral and theological issues raised by separation -- be it individual or group separation -- would carry us even farther from the substance of my scattered offerings.

I would like instead to spend my limited space on a better look at the Atonement and on a response to Larry's perhaps just charge that I argue a weak basis for faith.

Larry is quite correct in noting that I have placed two different understandings of the Atonement side by side at the end of my paper. One interpretation is a cosmological understanding of Christ's death as part of God's plan to redeem fallen mankind. True to my century, I have given this story a psychological basis by asserting that atonement is a necessary part of human survival, the only means by which society can be restored in the face of inevitable transgression, which would destroy the law that gives society cohesion.

The other interpretation is an internalized, spiritualized one, in which Christ's death is understood symbolically as the death of willful self through discipline and grace. This interpretation is the one more often preached about by early Friends, Wilburites, and old-style Hicksites. Liberal Friends as adherents of popular psychology have no use for it, hoping instead to find individual fulfillment through self-expression and manipulative social techniques.

The two interpretations emphasize different parts of the Biblical narrative to such an extent that one may well ask if this is one story or two. One interpretation stresses the Lamb of God, crucified and resurrected. The other, Christ's life, and ministry, passion and triumph. The former contains echoes of the Old Testament under-

standing of sacrifice; the latter shows similarities to the loneliness of the Temptation. The one, if too casually taken, runs the risk of overlooking the human; the other focuses so heavily upon the human plight that the divine action can pass unnoticed.

There are at least two areas, however, in which these disparate interpretations of the Atonement find unity. One is in result and the other is in experience. Both the cosmological atonement and the internalized atonement lead to a situation in which the moral law, through which God is perceived, is upheld and the society healed with the offender profoundly restored.

At the experiential level -- one notices in passing how Quaker it is to stress experience -- the disparate interpretations of the Atonement find unity in a sense of awe and humility: in the face of one's own nature, in the perception of one's relationship to society, and in the vision of God. Such experience is made possible, I would say, less by a philosophical discussion of principles like accountability or even love and justice than by a contemplation of the multifaceted story set side by side with the events of our earthly lives. Good narrative has the property of being understood in many ways and supported by different kinds of reasons at different periods. The most profound stories like the most profound laws will stand from age to age, though our justifications for them may crumble in less than a century.

Risking then a flimsy 20th-C explanation of why we should accept the whole Christian story, I want to try to answer one more of Larry's objections. All of us who have gone to school in recent centuries encounter obstacles to belief: deistic and mechanistic philosophies, talk of innate human dignity, proud reflections on human accomplishment, and misapplied evolutionary theories. With religious thought now relegated by law strictly to the private sector, it becomes easier and easier to assume that we are the inventors and technicians of our prosperity. If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, we are not educated to wisdom but at best to clever technicianship and at worst to figuring out ways to bend the system for private gain. Hence the accountability crisis.

I escape the scientific outlook of my age no more than the next fellow. In advocating a life disciplined to reflection on the Bible and our religious tradition, I am motivated at least in part by the contemporary conviction that our experience is shaped by what we let shape it. Indeed I am haunted by the behaviorist notion that this might be the whole story. Certainly there is good reason to be suspicious of "religious experience" that is not shaped by an enduring

religious tradition. The murderer who says, "God told me to do it," is a classic case. And the adulterer who protests, "It was right because it felt right," is all too familiar.

Why should we permit Christianity rather than some other religion to shape our experience? If we examine ourselves and our civilization, we come to realize that Christianity forms the basis of our lives. It is the means by which our society has survived and from it is derived everything worthwhile that gives meaning to our individual lives. To embrace some other religion would probably be an act of rebellion unworthy of either tradition.

How should one arrive at that point of view? There's the mystery! For some it comes from necessity, for some from the fear of the Lord. Some would say it is the work of the Holy Spirit. Having tasted of the the forbidden tree, we try to understand and explain in terms of influences and hormones, but in the end faith is probably always an act of Grace.

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## Letter

To The Editor:

This is written in response to the words the editor of QRT printed with approval in #59 from Arie Brouwer's acceptance speech as newly elected General Secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.: "In the strength of its best traditions and by reason of its place in the world, [the United States] can do more for justice, peace and freedom than any other nation in today's world."

I read these words with the same chill up my back that I felt when I heard John F. Kennedy promise that America would "bear any burden." The missionary impulse is rooted in noble purpose, but it turns into Cold War Liberalism, which in time turns into hot wars and the death of liberalism. The problem is that we don't know how to work except through American corporations which are in business to make money, not to be charitable. The problem is that we are culture-bound, provincial, and arrogant.

The great virtue of the Society of Friends, over three-and-a-half centuries, is that to an astonishing degree we managed not to be