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REFLECTIONS ON QUAKER MESTIZAJE

PAMELA CALVERT

“And there a voice came to him, Rise Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call thou not common.”


“These things are either matters of theological indifference or else they go to the heart of the matter and reflect our basic convictions about the nature of the church and define what it means to be Friends.”

John Punshon

Although the Society of Friends has been undeniably evangelistic since George Fox climbed Pendle Hill, for the first three hundred years of its history the vast majority of its membership was of Anglo-European descent. Therefore, while the Society has certainly faced its share of doctrinal conflict and schism, questions of culture and contextualization as such have not been seen as “the heart of the matter,” to echo Punshon: “what it means to be Friends.” Thus, as recently as 1990 Wilmer Cooper could define the criteria for “normative Quakerism” as “those beliefs and practices that, through the test of time, have formed a central theme and position in Quaker history,” without pausing to consider the role of monoculturalism in setting the terms of the “test.” The following passage in A Living Faith is particularly revealing:

Whenever one tries to evaluate Friend in terms of numbers, the results are never encouraging. According to the 1987 membership count there were 213,800 Friends in the world, 109,732 of whom live in North America (chiefly in the U.S.). The com-
parable count for twenty years ago was 193,800 in the world and 122,660 in North America. So the totals have not changed very much, although there has been a decline in North America while the primary growth areas have been Third World countries where Friends’ missions have gone. England and North America, the traditional home of Quakerism, clearly do not represent the growing edge. So if Friends have a future, we cannot rely on head count to determine what that future will be. There must be other things of significance to keep the Quaker witness alive.

With all due respect to a weighty Friend, one can scarcely ask for a clearer instance of what Ron Stansell calls “culture-bound theology.” As Cooper would have it, even though in twenty years’ time Quakerism’s adherents increased by nearly 50% in countries outside England and North America, somehow this does not constitute a “future” for Friends, or anything which will “keep the Quaker witness alive.”

In the spring of 2003, I began to visit Hispanic Friends churches on the west coast of the United States. Wholeheartedly agreeing with missiologist Orlando Costas that theology “should be, and in fact has always been, …a contextual reflection on the action of God in history,” I was interested to see whether I might begin to discern a contextual Hispanic Quaker theology, one which would be grounded in evangelical Friends traditions and practices and yet could be seen to bear the signs of a distinctly different cultural perspective.

Because of the success of a century of dedicated mission work, and the globalized movements of peoples, North American Quakers are increasingly obliged to consider the questions which have challenged the church since Peter’s transformative encounter with Cornelius: What is the essential seed of our faith and what is unnecessary cultural accretion? Is it possible to separate the two, and what can the criteria be for assessing the integrity of a new cultural variant of the Living Word? Far from pretending to present a universalized set of conclusions, I rather offer some initial observations and suggestions for further areas of fruitful conversation, one which I hope will be taken up by many Friends from all branches of the Society.
The raging evangelical fires of Quakerism rapidly cooled after Friends’ early forays. However, beginning in the 1860s, Friends in Britain and the United States who had been influenced by Joseph John Gurney and the Holiness revivals brought a new enthusiasm to mission. This differed from the existing Friends tradition of itinerant recorded ministers, insofar as these new initiatives were institutionalized, collective, and longterm.

Missionaries to Guatemala set out from Whittier in 1901 to distribute Bibles, and California Friends began home mission work among minorities shortly thereafter. The ladies’ mission society of First Friends Whittier began relief work in the Mexican-American neighborhood of “Jimtown” in 1905 and established a mission there in 1923, which became a full monthly meeting in Pico Rivera in the 1950s. Outreach to Mexican-Americans was also an early ministry of Bell Friends Church, which is now completely Hispanic, having celebrated its centennial in 2003.

Waves of immigration from Latin America due to war and globalization have accelerated the growth of this ministry in the past twenty years, not only in California but throughout the United States. There are now ten Hispanic Friends groups under the care of Evangelical Friends Church Southwest, and vibrant and growing meetings of Spanish-speaking Friends from Texas to Toronto. While no single one may be said to be “typical,” as an ensemble they span a history of Hispanic habitation and migration patterns in North America, from the 5th-generation Chicano Friends Church at Pico Rivera, at which the majority worships in English; to the 20-year-old Newberg Friends Church-Hispanic in Oregon, which is stabilizing as the original membership of Mexican migrant farmworkers has settled down in town; to the Friends Church at Pomona, which just celebrated its tenth anniversary but whose members, recent immigrants from Guatemala, are in many cases third- and fourth-generation Quakers. Because of this complicated interplay of history and movement, the Hispanic Friends churches in the United States exist in a web of international and intercultural relationship and mutual support without direct parallel in Anglo Friends experience or history.
Mestiza is something of a pejorative in the Spanish language, perhaps best translated as “mongrel” and used to describe individuals of mixed European and indigenous heritage. The noun form mestizaje was appropriated for theological discourse by Virgilio Elizondo in his landmark *Galilean Journey*. For Elizondo, who writes specifically of Mexican-Americans but whose observations apply broadly to Hispanic experience in the United States, the mestizo is the offspring of two parent cultures—first Spanish and indigenous, and later Hispanic and Anglo—and “does not fit conveniently into the analysis categories used by either parent group. The mestizo may understand them far better than they understand him or her. To be an insider-outsider, as is the mestizo, is to have closeness to and distance from both parent cultures.”

Elizondo draws a parallel between the mestizo experience and the cultural position of Jesus the Galilean Jew, whose universally salvific message was grounded in the historic particularity of “an impure, mixed-up, and rebellious area” whose residents were “regarded with patronizing contempt by the ‘pure-minded’ Jews of Jerusalem,” considered to be “lax, ignorant of the law, and therefore incapable of pure Jewish piety.” According to Elizondo, the regional accent was deemed so “defective” that Galileans were “precluded from studying the law” and “sometimes forbidden to recite the public prayers in the synagogue.” It is precisely in the Divine choice of hybridity and marginality that Elizondo finds a prophetic message for the church—one which “Jerusalem” Friends may find speaks directly to our condition. Ron Stansell calls on Friends doing intercultural ministry to become “chameleons,” prepared to be transformed both outwardly and inwardly. From being “subjects” of church mission, always the protagonist, we may find ourselves better situated as “objects” of God’s mission, listening for Divine guidance in a stigmatized accent, ready to query our assumptions about margin and center.

“Theology is the spinal cord of the church,” writes missiologist Orlando Costas. “It strengthens it and helps it to stand tall. Without theology, the church runs the risk of collapsing, unable to understand itself or its message and mission in the world, ill-equipped both intellectually and spiritually to deal with the challenges of its social context.” What form, then, could a Quaker mestizaje be said to be taking in the Hispanic Friends churches? How is Quakerism growing...
roots in a new sociocultural reality, using “its own vernacular, its cultural resources, its history, its religious worldview, its present dilemmas and challenges to reinterpret and communicate the meaning of the gospel in its context…taking control of the meaning of the gospel in their lives”? The following is offered as the merest prologue.

WORSHIP AND DISTINCTIVES

Hispanic Friends themselves differ on how Quakerism may be distinguished from other Protestant denominations. However, one particular flash-point has been around the place of neo-Pentecostal-influenced doctrines and charismatic worship forms in the Latin American and Hispanic Friends churches. This conflict contributed to divisions in Central America beginning in the 1960s which culminated in formal schism in 1986, so that there are now two Guatemalan yearly meetings based in Chiquimula, each with a seminary, publishing program, and radio station, as well as separated charismatic-influenced “Amigos Reformados” churches in Honduras.

Certain Pentecostal practices have been known to appear in the Hispanic Friends churches, such as speaking in tongues, but Friends do not consider themselves to be Pentecostals and do not have extensive associations with Hispanic Pentecostal congregations (partly, as one Friend told me, because the Pentecostals themselves do not consider Friends to be adequately orthodox). However, in the Hispanic Friends churches, as in Central America, music is where differences over Pentecostal influence are most visibly manifested. In the United States, the choice of music is a weekly “balancing act,” as one lay leader told me, with individual churches and individual members having very divergent opinions about what is and is not appropriate. Guatemalan Quaker Edgar Madrid Morales inveighs against the cantos carismáticos played on the opposing yearly meeting’s Radio Cultural Amigos, as well as the charismatic movement’s “massive concerts …with sensual and strident rhythms.”

The Friends distinctive that both Latin American and Hispanic Friends have adopted with special tenacity is the testimony against outward ordinances; Guatemalan Friends are said to “get volatile” about it when challenged. Their immovability may be seen to conform to a perspective which defines itself in terms of difference from the Roman Catholic church, emphasizing what Guatemalan Friend Carlos Marroquin calls “getting totally rid of the influence of the
Catholic atmosphere and mentality that [weighs] heavily upon our people, even when they have become born-again Christians.” This runs counter to the tendency since the 19th century revivals toward making the ordinances optional for Friends in the interest of Christian unity. This was, in fact, the very point upon which Ohio Yearly Meeting-Damascus (now Evangelical Friends Church — Eastern Region) could not unite with the Richmond Declaration of Faith, beginning the schismatic movement which culminated in the formation of Evangelical Friends International, of which the Central American yearly meetings and the evangelical Hispanic Friends churches are part.\(^{16}\)

One area where Hispanic Friends churches are not served as well as some might wish is in religious education materials. There is as yet no theological material being systematically written and published by Hispanic Friends churches for use in the United States. As contextualized theology is developing for the Hispanic Friends churches, then, at this time it tends to take primarily oral forms and arises from an assemblage of elements from multiple traditions and cultures: pastors use a combination of material produced by the yearly meetings in Guatemala, other work translated from English by U.S. yearly meetings, and an array of Spanish-language and translated publications from evangelical denominations and para-church organizations. Some pastors find the combination to be unsatisfactory, obliging them to read and apply the materials “selectively” because of the limitations in cultural or doctrinal relevance. This phenomenon is not limited to Friends; Pentecostal theologian Samuel Soliván notes the widespread “tendency to solve or address North American Hispanic concerns with Latin American solutions.”\(^{17}\)

There is little or no silent waiting in Hispanic Friends churches. This is not to say that intensive prayer and listening for the leading of God are not a part of Hispanic Friends’ public worship; both before and during the service, individuals will kneel at their seats or at the mourner’s bench for extended periods of time, deeply centered in personal devotion. However, communal worship is focused outward in celebration and gratitude. Nonetheless, the absence of open worship as such in the Hispanic churches is not inevitably a sign, as Punshon has observed, that “worship is becoming entertainment and something is going seriously wrong.” Hispanic Friends do not “substitute Christian music” for “the moving of the Spirit,” nor does their worship superficially “draw the heart and mind away from God and
not toward him.” One could argue that the lack of restrictions on the length of worship—so unlike Anglo meetings across the theological board—are a far more significant sign of openness to the movement of the Spirit. As one Hispanic theologian observes, “It is not that time is not important to Hispanics, but rather that where the Spirit of God is given control of the worship experience, God cannot be bounded by time and space.”

Hispanic Friends adhere to the peace testimony, although it does not take the politically activist forms characteristic of liberal Quaker meetings. This different perspective on the relationship of worship to witness is the basis for Guatemalan Friends holding themselves at a “reserve” from unprogrammed Quakers. The yearly meeting Iglesias Evangélicas “Amigos” de Guatemala united in 1986 in an accord (re-affirmed in 2000) to have “no type of alliance with non-evangelical Friends, owing to their many differences in doctrine and worship customs.”

The guiding evangelical approach to the peace testimony, adhered to by Latin American and Hispanic Friends, is that surrendering one’s life to Christ brings peace to the individual, and therefore the task of the believer is to evangelize, so that peace might come to society as a whole. Pomona Friends Church’s monthly magazine Desafío, or “Challenge,” editorialized in its April 2003 issue “Guerra O Paz?” (War or Peace?), “Is it time to be afraid? If you don’t have Christ YES, but if you have received Christ in your heart, although the world may be in chaos, you have His peace.” The issue’s main article considers attitudes toward war and peace to be “a personal decision” and affirms pacifism as an option for Christians, but cautions against a judgmental attitude, insofar as “pacifism is not a panacea which solves all problems.”

**Conclusion**

What is the witness that the Hispanic Friends church brings to the Society of Friends? Hispanic Friends are developing a theology that is discernibly rooted in Quaker traditions and teachings, especially as these have evolved from the nineteenth century revivals. As is true for all church traditions—at all times and in all places—socio-cultural circumstances have the effect of emphasizing the importance of some elements and diminishing others. In this regard, a pastor remarks that the Hispanic Friends church in the United States is distinct from its...
Latin American counterpart in its “more open worship, less dogmatic forms, greater openness to ideas of change and to social and community outreach.” There is evidence that both the Latin American and Hispanic Friends churches are maintaining a stricter adherence to Quaker distinctives around ordinances than may be the overall sense of the evangelical yearly meetings in the United States. Because of the enormous impact of Pentecostalism in Latin America, the influence of charismatic worship is a far more significant issue for Hispanic Friends than it is for Anglos.

Despite the many ways in which resources and value flow in both directions, there is an undeniably asymmetric dynamic in the relationship between Anglo and Hispanic Friends. Many Hispanic meetings operate as a “ministry” or “mission” of an Anglo-majority church, and all are under the authority of a yearly meeting in which the weight of power is with Anglo Friends. Hispanic pastors are educated at either Anglo-funded seminaries in Central America or at Anglo-directed (and usually English-language) programs in the United States, using materials for the most part written, published, and/or funded by Anglo Friends. Nonetheless, the socio-political condition of Hispanic Friends is so vastly different from that of middle-class Anglo Quakers—as well as from that of Latin American Friends—that one might expect a distinct approach to the social gospel to arise from their situation, one derived from and yet markedly unlike its those of its forebears. How Anglo Friends will respond to this remains to be seen.

For one Hispanic pastor, all this is a non-issue: “Where the Bible comes in, culture is finished!,” he exclaims. My own hope is that Hispanic Friends may begin to reveal and de-naturalize the cultural assumptions that North Atlantic Quakerism takes for granted, and that we welcome the opportunity to re-interrogate the “normative” based on this witness among us. To give Wilmer Cooper the last word, “Let us become expendable in the hands of God for the purpose of fulfilling God’s purposes through us.”

NOTES

3. Ibid., 151.

5. A note on names: the cultural implications of, and preferences for, “Latino” and/or “Hispanic” are a topic of active debate in the Latino/Hispanic comunidad at this time. For the greatest clarity in this particular article, I use “Hispanic” for persons and cultures of Latin American descent in el norte, and “Latin American” to refer to those persons and cultures in the national territories south of the U.S.-Mexico border. “Anglo” is a non-pejorative term commonly used in the western U.S. for persons of European descent, vis a vis those of Latin American descent.


18. Punshon, 10.


20. I was surprised to find that no evangelical Friend I spoke with for this article, either Hispanic or Anglo returned missionary, had ever heard of the sanctuary movement of the 1980s, despite its enormous impact on liberal Quaker meetings and its seeming direct relevance to the Friends churches in Central America and Hispanic Friends ministries in the United States. The effect of the Central American civil wars on the Society of Friends—north and south, liberal and evangelical—merits extensive further study.


24. Cooper, 163.