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ON THE NATURE AND CENTRALITY OF THE CONCEPT OF ‘PRACTICE’ AMONG QUAKERS

RUPERT READ

What is here urged are internal practices and habits of the mind. What is here urged are secret habits of unceasing orientation of the deeps of our being about the Inward Light, ways of conducting our inward life so that we are perpetually bowed in worship, while we are also very busy in the world of daily affairs.

—Thomas Kelly

WHAT IS IT THAT BINDS FRIENDS together? What is it, more than anything else, that makes Friends keep talking to and being with and doing what we call “worshiping” with Friends? What makes Friends Friends?

Friends have no creed. This makes us unique among bodies with close historical ties and affinities to Christianity; and also perhaps in one fell swoop takes us partly outside that tradition (such that we’re both inside and outside it, as it were). It surely seems to imply directly that we cannot find the answer to the question with which I began in terms of what Friends believe (in). Does this fact not also demand that we reconsider the practice of judging the Quakerliness of Friends or potential Friends by means of their faith? To rephrase, bluntly: We ought to question whether it can be anything to do with one’s faith that makes a Friend a Friend.

Again: Compared at least to most branches of Christianity, Quakerism is unique in its emphasis on practice, not necessarily in the sense of “good works,” but in the sense, compressedly-speaking, of an active engagement by all in worship, and in life outside of formal worship. “But how can this be? surely what is and has always been important to Friends is faith and practice?” I have at this point to venture an uncomfortable hypothesis, one which is sure to raise ire, but which I think in its essentials must be correct: that Friends’ traditional emphases on faith and practice have to be recast. In particular, that faith is only of significance to being constitutive of Quakerliness insofar as it is...
essential to Quaker practice. How far is that? Not very far at all; for right away we have to ask, faith in what exactly? Not all Quakers would claim faith in God any more; or, at least, they would disagree rather deeply about what God is. And who among Friends can justify (and how?) a proprietary claim on the terms “religious” or “God”?

I venture that some would not even claim to have faith in anything, aside from vagaries such as “the Light in each and every one of us.” Such phrases, useful as they are, can hardly bind us together very tightly. Can we substitute “faithfulness” for “faith”? Possibly. Faithfulness as an embodied attitude that need not directly imply faith in any one thing. But then faithfulness itself is a kind of practice.

Why is it that I feel it necessary to venture this unconventional “practicist” hypothesis? Well, what are we, if not seekers? Must we all be seeking after the same thing? Our creedlessness, in tandem with our tolerance for diverse spiritual practices in and out of Meeting—so long as these are not directly subversive of other of our practices, or of other Friends—can only imply that faith is simply not an essential part of what it is to be who we are collectively. (Of course, it may be an essential part of how many of us individually conceive of our faith, or of our religion, or even of our practice.)

In greater specificity, what constitutes “Quaker practice”? Well, many things, but very centrally Quaker practice is what we do in Meeting. What do Quakers do? They/we go to Meeting, they/we constitute meeting. And they demand nothing more nor less of each other than a sincere and non-hostile effort at so constituting Meeting, at being Friends. They once did demand more than this, and they—we—may still ask and want (for) more; but this is all that we demand of each other, in virtue of our being Quakers (as opposed to in virtue of our being, e.g., close friends, or members of a worship-sharing group).

This is not of course to rule out supererogatory efforts at being Quakerly. It is not to collapse what it is to be a very good Quaker into what it is merely to be a Quaker, period. It is just to clarify the latter concept. When we understand better what it is to be a Quaker, indeed, it makes more sense that and why T. Kelly’s advice on extending the spirit of Meeting into much or all of our lives is good advice on how to be a good Quaker, or “at least” on how one can perhaps best enhance spiritual growth within the ambit of the Society of Friends.

And this is not to settle for second-best. For there is nothing more that we need all try, hopelessly, completely to agree upon if it is this prac-
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Nor is this, I think, merely a reiteration of themes that are quite familiar from the Quaker “Universalist” perspective. For, while I personally am in agreement with most Universalist principles and clichés, insofar as there is anything with which to agree or disagree in them, my argument here has been more fundamental and wide-ranging in scope. I have contended that there are no principles which are central to Quakerism any more, save for principles of practice. That is, socio-ethical-spiritual principles of action outside of Meeting, and the action, the practice, of sitting and waiting in silence, inside Meeting. And, we should add, of infusing as much of our lives, each others’ and (especially) our own, with the discipline and “spirit” of these practices, of almost continually working on ourselves mentally, spiritually, and along with others. But this may or may not involve faith; all it necessarily involves is a rather particular kind of action.

A problem for any argument contrariwise is that we will find all sorts of perhaps unexpected and surely unnecessary conflicts arising, if we make certain kinds of belief or faith criterial for “Friend-hood.” That is, unless it were just to happen by an extraordinary coincidence that we all happen to believe in the very same thing (and surely most of us are already quite well aware that that is not the case).

These conflicts are unnecessary, for they will mostly not occur unless we deliberately pursue them. In the normal practice even of a close-knit Meeting, there will be few opportunities to engage in quasi-theological disagreement, providing one speaks only when one feels one really ought or must, and listens to ministry in a spirit of looking for the good. Quaker ministry is a practice, and is often about practices. It is not a forum for theological discord.

There are some analogies here with Thomas Kuhn’s well-known (if much-misunderstood) notion of “new paradigms” and “paradigm-shift.” When scientists start to notice the need for a new “paradigm” (or over-arching theory), because of problems with the existing theory or theories, they suddenly find that they have all sorts of disagreements about what they believe now, about what the existing theory is exactly. These differences in belief never needed to come out before; because that all the members of the community of scientists did the same thing, that they shared a certain scientific practice (i.e., did the same kinds of experiments, etc.), was (and will be again, once a new theoretical paradigm is settled upon, and eventually fades into the background) the important thing for the community of scientists in question.
Similarly, that is what is important for us, I claim. The difference in our case is that religions, unlike sciences (so long, that is, as they do not try supernaturally to ape the sciences), are never forced to change paradigms, never forced to agree explicitly upon a new set of beliefs, because religions thankfully have utterly different standards of “consistency” and “empirical adequacy”; indeed, the latter is largely irrelevant. Thus we Quakers need never reach the point of “duking it out” over ideology and theology; because that we share a central common practice is the important thing.

Now if someone tells us that whenever they sit in silence in a Quaker Meeting they only think about, for example, their career plans, then we may seriously doubt whether they are a Friend at all. (And this is surely so whether they be in a programmed or an unprogrammed Meeting!) But this would not be because they do not have or show faith. If you asked them about their beliefs you might find that they have deeply held theistic religious convictions, or even that they profess a faith just the same as yours. No, this would be because they are not actually taking part in the most crucial Quaker practice of all: the precious collective, meditative, focused silence and ministry of Quaker Meeting.

It is partaking of this practice, nothing more nor less, I have argued, that—if anything—makes Friends Friends. And it is thus, I take it, that we can continue to enact Thomas Kelly’s marvelous, difficult, yet practicable vision.

NOTES

1. Grateful acknowledgments to Steve Davison, Anne De Vivo, and John Sisko for inspiration and constructive criticism. This discussion of the nature of (unprogrammed—even, all?) Friends is part of a work in progress, subtitled “A Case-Study in Applying Wittgensteinian and Kuhnian Thought to Religion, and Vice Versa.” Comments are welcomed.


3. Greg Pahl and Mary Grundy have recently cast some interesting light obliquely on these questions, in the pages of Friends Journal. In compelling interlocking pieces, they have shown us how deep differences in the nature of our beliefs or faiths can be rendered moot by means of an emphasis on the communality of many of our experiences and spiritual practices, and a genuine sharing on the basis of equal respect. See Pahl, “Christocentric and Universalist Friends: Moving Beyond the Stereotypes”; and Grundy, “In the Presence of God,” Friends Journal 41:1 (Jan. ‘95), pp. 11-14. Their articles are accounts of what proceeded in a quite unconventional “process-oriented” (as opposed to intellectual-theoretical) week-long workshop on “Christocentric and Universalist Friends” at the Friends General Conference.

4. Of course, it goes without stressing that such a practice has always been taken to be essential to all Quaker business, including for example—indeed, especially—Quaker Meeting with a


6. Here again I am hugely impressed by the approach taken by Marty Grundy, et al; even the dichotomy between the Christocentrist and the Universalist can perhaps be overcome and sublimed by means of an emphasis on what we share in common in our experiences and our actions. What we believe, perhaps astonishingly, can be almost entirely sidelined, made irrelevant.