

May 27, 1984

Last week I was made the temporary custodian of some books which are seeking their true owner. I made the mistake of peeking into these books, and wound up so absorbed that I was completely derailed from several important household projects!

The books are written by an English Quaker associated with the British Broadcasting Company. He has been running a series of broadcasts for the BBC about various Christian doctrines: the Incarnation, the Atonement, the sacraments, and so forth. As we know, although these doctrines are deeply cherished by much of the Christian church, they are apt to be regarded somewhat warily by Friends. Nevertheless, the radio series on these topics operated by this British Friend was so "objective" that no Quaker bias could be detected, which pleased everyone—except the Quakers. In fact, the Church of England gave several awards to the program.

The books I had in my possession were written for Friends by this BBC broadcaster, Gerald Priestland, in response to their query to him: "And what doest thou think?" And, when writing for a Quaker audience, Gerald Priestland seems to conclude that, after all, these cherished Christian doctrines are indeed vaguely unsatisfying in many respects, that as a matter of fact they seem always to raise more questions than they answer.

Gerald Priestland does not discuss it in the material I saw, but his attitude toward these doctrines reminded me of my own thinking about Socrates, who somehow seems so much greater than Plato, even though everything that we know about Socrates is transmitted to us via Plato. But in a rough kind of way, Socrates asks questions and Plato answers them. Plato's answers are obviously developed with great brilliance and power; yet why does the questioner seem greater than the answerer? Why does Socrates as questioner seem to have a kind of power of which Plato, the answerer, is but a mere shadow?

It has to do with the quality of consciousness which questioning involves. For at the moment when we are questioning and seeking, we are open, we are at a heightened state of awareness and of expectancy, a state from which the filling in of answers inevitably represents a certain deflation. It is often said that one knows a person best by the questions he asks. Socrates' questions were not questions which sew doubt, confusion, and disorder, but questions which raised awareness and heightened expectancy, questions which had a transforming power on those who took the trouble to contemplate them, a transforming power which the answers of the questions do not necessarily have.

Perhaps this is one reason why Friends pose for themselves and for each other queries, questions, rather than doctrines or answers.

Spiritual wisdom is not something we know; rather, it is something we are—a quality of being. The doctrines which have been left to us by the great spirits of past ages are really just fossils, and it takes a great leap of imagination to deduce from these fossils what the living, breathing, character of the being they represent was. George Fox reminded us that Scripture cannot be properly understood unless it is read from a rootedness in the same Spirit from which it was written. The doctrines, when thought about deeply, are in and of themselves incomplete and unsatisfying, and turning them into rigid tests of faith or of membership is to miss the point entirely. For it is only to the extent that they raise questions that they begin to exert their transforming power, that they begin to help us understand how we can be what the great prophets of old once were. Let us, then, always make room in the life of our own Religious Society for a holy uncertainty.