

Identity, Authority and Community: A Report on the Pre-Triennial Conference Given by Dan Seeger at New York Yearly Meeting on 7th month 28, 1998

The religious sensibility arises from an awareness that there is something beyond ourselves to which we owe loyalty and gratitude, that we ourselves are not the sole end and purpose of our own existence, but rather that there are ends which are in need of us. We sense that within us and around us and seeking to make Itself known to us there is a Truth with which we can connect and a pure principle of Goodness to which we can resonate as we live out the span of years allotted to us.

This is true not only of individuals, but also of religious communities. We are called to answer the question: "What does the Lord require of us as a people?" As Jesus read the signs of his time, we must read the signs of ours. Given the current state of human affairs, how would a Spirit-led community become a pattern or example of a way of living and being which would support the next phase of human development? A religious community ought to bring individual spiritual experience into the social realm by discovering God's purposes together. The discerning community not only helps sharpen individual faithfulness by nurturing personal commitment; it also poses a model of Truth-governed communal living to the larger human society around it, which can become estranged from understanding and following the divine word.

Some Friends associated with the Friends World Committee for Consultation and with Woodbrooke, the Quaker Study Center near Birmingham, England, were led to organize a gathering of Friends from many countries to examine the condition of worldwide Quakerism with respect to these matters of nurturing faithfulness in individuals' lives and of witnessing as a community of faith to a vision of a just and peaceable human society. This was a pre-triennial gathering scheduled to take advantage of the coming together of Friends from around the world in connection with last summer's FWCC Triennial.

The theme of the conference was "Identity, Authority and Community in the Religious Society of Friends." My recollection is that a very impressive and weighty group of about 90 Friends from all over the world participated in four days of searching dialogue and deep worship. There had been extensive preparation by the conference's organizers, including surveys of any yearly meeting willing to participate. Friends attended the conference as concerned individuals, however, and not as yearly meeting delegates or representatives.

Although we love FWCC because it usually draws together people from all branches of Quakerism, this particular conference, perhaps because of the theme, drew mostly unprogrammed Friends from around the world. There were a handful of other Friends present who held their own very well, but this was a dialogue mainly among unprogrammed Friends about "Identity, Authority and Community."

Much thought was given to the issue of faith content in Friends spiritual life. Clearly, many Friends esteem the characteristic "creedlessness" of Quaker spirituality; but have we carried this to such an extreme that we have an absolute creedal belief in our own creedlessness? Are we engaged in a process of spiritual seeking and searching covered by the stipulation that nothing must ever be found? Is our life as a faith community characterized by an absolute "perhapsness"? Do attenders decline to become members simply because they cannot be clear what it is they would be committing to?

Through the centuries we know that mainstream churches have claimed to know and to say too much about God, and many of the pretensions of mainstream churches in the past are now embarrassing, even to them. It is not uncommon for contemporary theologians to suggest that the only possible posture of a Christian before God is silence before mystery. As Friends we are, I suppose, as usual, several decades, or even several generations, in the avant garde. A recent survey of Friends in Britain Yearly Meeting disclosed that 40% of the members identify themselves as agnostic. What becomes of the hope that the body can be gathered into unity under the Guidance of the Holy Spirit if 40% of those participating are uncertain that the Holy Spirit exists? Are we in the process of abandoning the expectation that the gathered community can know something in common which individuals could not know alone?

There was talk about the Christian content of Quakerism, and about the apparently somewhat commonplace occurrence that people are apt to be reprimanded for using Christian vocabulary and Christian thought forms in Quaker contexts. Are such people being elided for their Christianity, or simply for their certainty? We welcome into membership people who are refugees from Christian malpractice experienced in other denominations. Such Friends, when hearing Christian vocabulary used among Friends, can respond as if a safe haven they have found is being invaded by an enemy. This is an authentic experience and must be respected. Yet we must also recognize that to be accepting of Sufi or Vedic vocabulary while being hostile to Christian thought is not authentic universalism.

Are we in danger of becoming a spiritual fellowship of individuals each inventing his or her own faith, with the only common denominator being tolerance for all these individual efforts? Is this a gathered people? Is this a great people? Is this a people who has something to give its children? Is this a people who can be patterns and examples for a world community which has suffered a century of horrors and humiliations?

Some at the conference affirmed that a commitment to our social testimonies remained strong among Friends: the peace testimony and non-violence; the testimonies on racial and gender equality; the testimony on simplicity; faithfulness to Friends' unique way of doing business; the practice of unprogrammed worship. There is clearly a commitment to a faith which is enacted rather than explained. Friends may be developing a religious devotion to process and to a purely ethical creed. Perhaps this is good considered against a Christian heritage characterized by all too much bickering and doctrinal hair-splitting. It is a switch from orthodoxy (right belief) to orthopraxis (right living or right practice). Such an approach is not dissimilar to that of Jesus himself. This may be the continuing revelation, the pattern for the future.

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I have described the content of this conference mainly in terms of questions, for the conference itself did not seek conclusions. Friends should look for two post-conference publications: one gives account of the results of the surveys of yearly meetings and of the conference proceedings. This is already in circulation. The second publication, still in preparation, will be a series of essays or reflections by the presenters at the conference. The purpose is not to announce solutions but to encourage searching by monthly and yearly meetings.

The next Triennial will be in New Hampshire. There has been some talk of having a follow-up pre-triennial conference at Pendle Hill to gather and reflect upon reactions in meetings to this conference's publications. These plans are still tentative so I cannot really announce them with any certainty. But I do hope that Friends will check the Pendle Hill Bookstore catalog for the second post-conference publication, which we will make available as soon as it is ready. I am confident that monthly meetings will find it to be valuable as a guide in their religious education efforts.