

The Nature of Quakerism

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The Hardest Journey

The doctrines of the Society of Friends may be divided into three classes, to be designated here as primary, secondary and tertiary. In a general way the secondary come from the primary, and the tertiary derive their character from the secondary.

According to this scheme the primary doctrine concerns the Inward Light, the secondary, the meeting for worship and the meeting for business, and the tertiary, the outreaching social implications of the type of community life expressed through these meetings.

The primary doctrine of the Society of Friends declares that the Presence of God is felt at the apex of the human soul and that man can therefore know and heed God directly, without any intermediary in the form of church, priest, sacrament, or sacred book. God is for man both immanent and transcendent; immanent because He is not mechanically operating on man from without but sharing in his life; transcendent, for the Divine Life extends infinitely beyond and above all human life. Many figures of speech are used to designate this Divine Presence which, as immanent in man, is personal and, as transcendent, is super-personal. It is "Light," "Power," "Word," "Seed of the Kingdom," "Christ Within." God dwells in man to guide him and transform him into the likeness of His Son. Man's endeavor should be to merge his will with the Divine Will, as far as he is able to comprehend it, and by obedience to become an instrument through which God's power works upon the world. To seek such a goal is to seek to be an embodiment of Divine Life. In this search man's life acquires unity and purpose.

Such a doctrine is not peculiar to Quakerism nor even to Christianity. It has existed in various forms in all the great religions of the world. In different ages and in different places the experience of the Presence of God has been described in essentially the same terms. This in itself is evidence of its validity and reality. All human beings have had some measure of this experience, whether they are aware of its nature or not. All human beings are therefore infinitely valuable and all can be appealed to as capable of right action.

Such a religion is an eternal gospel not exclusively related to particular historical events. But religion must have its temporal as well as its eternal aspect. The Society of Friends is a Christian society. It is therefore aware of the great significance of the historical events which gave rise to the Christian religion, events which can be designated as additional primary doctrines. Only when the eye of time and the eye of eternity see a single picture does Truth acquire the dimension of depth.

Quakerism shares its primary and its tertiary doctrines with many other religious groups. Only in what we are calling the secondary doctrines is Quakerism unique and clearly distinguished from all other sects and opinions. These secondary doctrines are embodied in the meeting for worship and the meeting for business which constitute definite types of community life with definite patterns of behavior. In them the individual experience of God's light and leading becomes a group experience by which the Divine Presence in the midst operates as a uniting or coordinating Power. As the presence of God in the individual becomes a means whereby man is unified and the different elements in his being are coordinated on a higher level of existence, so the presence of God in the group operates upon its members, unifying them into a single organic whole in which the various parts function toward a single end. In

the meeting, man aspires upward toward God and horizontally toward his fellow worshippers and, as a result, the divine-human relationship and the inter-human relationship blend and reinforce each other. In the meeting for worship the Godward direction of attention is emphasized and in the meeting for business the manward direction. Each direction needs something of the other if the goal is to be reached.

In the meeting for worship there is no prearranged program. Worshipers wait in silence, endeavoring to make themselves as open as possible to the inflowings of Divine Life and as sensitive as possible to the whisperings of the still, small voice. They cultivate not only awareness of God but also awareness of their fellowmen. The hard shell of self-centeredness is dissolved and life flows inward and outward, both Godward and manward. Lonely separateness is lost in a greater life, which is both personal and more than personal. Sometimes the silence is broken when the worshiper feels, arising in his heart, a message which he is able to recognize as one which is not intended for himself alone. If he is sufficiently sensitive he will know what will be helpful to the meeting. Such a discourse is not in the form of argument, lecture, or discussion. It comes from a deeper source than these. It is a simple, brief statement of insight born in the silence. A message appropriate to a forum or discussion group is not appropriate for a meeting, the primary purpose of which is to wait upon God. Spoken words must enhance the spirit of solemnity in the awful presence of the Most High.

In the meeting for business the Society of Friends makes its decisions regarding its own affairs and its work in the world around it. The only official is a clerk whose duty is to record the decisions of the meeting. There is no voting. Matters before the meeting are discussed in a spirit of submission to the Divine ordering until unity is reached.

Theoretically there is no coercion of a minority by a majority. If unity is not reached no decision is made, though it is not always necessary to wait for complete unity on matters of slight importance or on decisions which cannot be postponed. The final result is in general not a compromise. Often it is a new and unexpected result brought about by the synthesis of different points of view. This method of achieving agreement on a course of action through submitting to a harmonizing power operating from a superhuman level can be described as organic rather than mechanical though both these terms are figures of speech. It sometimes works very slowly, for organic growth is slower than mechanical construction. The search for truth and unity is sometimes a long and difficult one, requiring much love and tolerance, but the goal when achieved is worth the patient effort. Unity is always possible to those who go deep enough, for in the depth of our beings we are all one, as branches are one in the vine. Or, to use another figure, truth is one and the nearer we come to the one Light of Truth, the nearer we come to one another.

The tertiary or social doctrines of the Society of Friends evolve out of the primary and secondary doctrines. The meetings for worship or business are small communities of persons who aim to develop among themselves certain types of relationship with God and one another. These types of relationships, originating within the meeting, tend to become a complete pattern of life to be lived outside the meeting as well as within it. The meeting both creates and exemplifies the kind of behavior which ought to prevail everywhere. It is therefore both a laboratory and a training ground for the desired social order. It may even become a germ cell of the new society of tomorrow.

All the social doctrines can be derived directly from the primary doctrines of the Inward Light and the teachings of Jesus. This has often been done, both in the Society of

Friends and in other religious societies. The Christian social gospel is of course by no means peculiar to the Quakers. However, it is probable that this particular sequence of primary producing secondary and the secondary conditioning the form of the tertiary testimonies occasions social action in the form which is characteristic of the Society of Friends. Such social action is more than a logical deduction from the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the ethics of the New Testament. It grows out of actual experiences in meetings for worship or business over a period of time. The individual becomes slowly sensitized to the world's needs. The tender plant is first nurtured in the seed-bed of the meeting. When it is strong enough it can be set out to grow in a less favorable environment.

Social testimonies evolve slowly out of the practice and form of the meetings. Actions which seem right today may become wrong tomorrow in the light of further insight. The Society of Friends is still far from discovering all that is implied in these divine-human communities. For the sake of a clearness which is obtained at the price of oversimplification, four social doctrines are here singled out for consideration. Let us list them as community, harmony, equality, and simplicity. Obviously in such a classification there is much overlapping.

All four are exemplified in a Friends meeting as follows:

Community is present in the attempt of the meeting to become a unified, closely integrated group of persons which is not just a collection of separate individuals, but a living whole which is more than the sum of its parts. Not only is a spiritual and intellectual group life created in a successful meeting but, in various degrees, material interdependence develops as well.

Harmony is in some respects a better word than "pacifism" which has acquired an unfortunate negative connotation. "Pacifism," however, being derived from *pax*

and *facio*, designates “peace making” and is therefore a positive rather than a negative doctrine. It might be called creative peaceableness. Spontaneous pacifism should arise in the meeting for worship for there is no authoritarian leadership coercing the meeting to follow a prearranged program, no hymns are sung to constrain an individual to express feelings which he does not experience and no written creed exists to impress belief. In the meeting for business there is theoretically no coercion of a minority by a majority, nor the reverse. Peaceableness exists as a positive power by which an inner appeal is made to the best that is in man, rather than as an external pressure by forces from outside him. This must include that kind of love and understanding which integrates separate and conflicting elements into a higher unity.

Equality is represented in the meeting by the equal opportunity for all to take part in the worship or business regardless of age, sex, or official position. This does not mean that the opinions of all have equal weight in determining decisions. There are obvious differences of ability and insight, but it does mean that every opinion expressed must be taken into account according to its truth and not according to the status of the person who utters it.

Simplicity, as Friends have used the word, has had various meanings at different times in Quaker history. In general it means the absence of superfluity. It has often had the broader connotations of sincerity, integrity, practicality and consistency. For example, an elaborate decoration in a Quaker meeting house would not only be superfluous, but would disturb the harmony which belongs to a single consistent whole. The absence of ritualistic symbols in Quaker worship is in accord with simplicity because, either that which is symbolized is present, in which case the symbol may be considered superfluous, or if that which is symbolized is not present, the symbol may

become a misleading substitute. The term "simplicity of Truth" is characteristic. Simplicity in speech meant the use of simple direct statements unadorned with elaborate figures of rhetoric or strained attempts at eloquence. If an item of dress, speech or behavior was practical, it was classed as being in accordance with the simplicity of truth.

These four social testimonies being present within the meeting tend to spread beyond it, though obviously they are less workable in an unsympathetic environment.

Community becomes a testimony which aims to increase the interdependence of men everywhere. On its spiritual side this sense of interdependence expresses itself in a vigorous effort to interpret the faith to the world, an effort which lost much of its power after the first generation of Friends. On its economic side this sense of interdependence has expressed itself in numerous attempts to aid the poor and to improve the condition of depressed elements in society. Penn's Holy Experiment in Pennsylvania was an effort to build up a political community on Quaker principles. There has been much individual philanthropy in the Society of Friends. During and after almost every war in Europe and America for the past three centuries, Friends have been engaged in some form of relief work. Since the First World War this work has been carried on through the Friends Service Council in England and the American Friends Service Committee. Friends have sought to give aid in such disasters as war or industrial conflict, because these emergencies are caused by wrong human attitudes. Aid is given not only for physical relief but also with a view to restoring those human relationships which have been destroyed by conflict. Today the Society of Friends is seeking light as to what to do about certain defects of the present social order. As in previous generations, its efforts aim at no general panaceas, but at experimental measures to right this or that wrong as the way may open.

Harmony, or pacifism, the second social doctrine to develop, appeared at an early date in the refusal of Friends to take any part in war. Later it led them to find non-violent and sympathetic ways of dealing with the insane and with criminals in prison. But Friends are still far from agreement as to the extent to which this principle can be applied. Each individual must draw the line at the point where his conscience finds it to be.

Friends as a rule endorse the state as an institution, but they believe that civil disobedience may sometimes be a Christian duty. The will of God as revealed in the conscience must take precedence over the law of the state.

Even in meeting-matters there seems to be a limit beyond which harmony must be sacrificed. For instance, if a speaker is seriously disturbing, if he is out of time with the general purpose of the meeting and the spirit of love in which it seeks to conduct itself; after every constraining resource has proved unavailing in the sympathetic endeavor to enlighten him, he must be denied freedom to speak.

Equality, as applied to sex, race and class was a doctrine which developed early. It led Friends from the beginning to preach religious liberty and almost single-handed to win the fight for it by continuing to hold their meetings when all nonconformity was illegal. Thousands suffered fine and imprisonment because they would not take off their hats to superiors, would not use flattering titles of address, would not bow the knee to any man. Since the pronoun "you" was used to social superiors and not used to inferiors, Friends used "thou" and "thee" to everyone. As in the Quaker marriage there is no promise of obedience of wife to husband, so it is in the larger human family. Friends gave up their slaves in America nearly a century before the Civil War. The feeling for equality impelled some to take an active part in the cause of women's rights, of the

rights of Negroes, of Indians and of economic classes deprived of the opportunity to improve their condition. Equality does not mean that all men are essentially uniform and should therefore be forcibly reduced to the same economic or social level. It does mean that the rights and opportunities of all should be equalized. Are not all temples of the living God and, as such, are not all worthy of reverence?

Simplicity is a doctrine which is, perhaps, more personal and less social than the other three. Judicial oaths, implying two standards of truth-telling, were not in accordance with "the simplicity of Truth" and Friends, after extraordinary suffering, succeeded in altering the law to permit an affirmation to be substituted. As one fixed price for an article of merchandise was more direct and simple than haggling over the price, Quaker merchants initiated the one price system. Simplicity was mainly propagated by example in the use of simple direct statements, by integrity in dealings and plainness of living. Quaker dress became formalized during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the adoption of a single, once prevalent, style as protest against victimization by elaborate and changing fashions. This formal plain dress had an additional purpose. It notified the world that the wearer must be treated as a person standing for certain principles.

Today Friends are hardly to be distinguished from others in such matters. Music and painting, drama and works of fiction are no longer, as formerly, considered inconsistent with the simplicity of truth as well as time consuming. It is now realized that the arts have a peculiar kind of truth of their own. There is still need for an application of the testimony for simplicity in amusements, in the omission of unnecessary or harmful luxuries and in the attempt to lessen the increasing busy-ness and complexity of life.

That the development of the secondary doctrines applicable within the group into the tertiary doctrines applicable to all society takes place slowly and always leaves much to be desired is an obvious fact of history. The question constantly arises: To what extent can a type of behavior, developed within a small comparatively homogeneous community, become a standard for action outside that community? Some would say that what is right in one place is right in another and that there can be no compromise. Some would proceed by a double standard. In the Catholic Church, for example, the monastic community observes a more rigorous standard than does the laity in general. Many Protestants appear to assent to one standard for "this evil world" where force must be used, and another for a kingdom of heaven in the life to come where love will prevail. Whatever the Quaker theory may be on this matter, Quakers have, in practice, first built up the small community of the meeting, in which they can be fairly consistent. From that point they have gone out into the world depending on divine guidance to indicate how much consistency is in each instance required of them. According to Quaker autobiographies many have been enabled to live lives which they believed were consistent for long periods of time, lives which resulted in prolonged inner peace and serenity. This however was at a time when consistency was made easier by a large degree of isolation in a simple type of society. It has been comparatively easy to draw the line at partaking in war for that limit could be clearly defined. But it is not so easy today to decide to what extent a Quaker can take part in business and other large scale activities and still adhere strictly to the standards of his religion. That is a question which each, in view of the immense complexity of modern social and business relations, must answer according to his own light and leading.