Quaker Testimonies, Ecological Understanding, and a Moral Economy

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The Evolutionary Heritage of Quakerism

The Religious Society of Friends introduced a change in consciousness about spiritual life into the Christian tradition that has had profound consequences. When George Fox came down from Pendle Hill and announced that “Christ has come to teach his people himself,” he shifted the emphasis of spiritual life from a focus on personal security to the process of on-going learning.

The process of learning that became central to Quaker spiritual life was called “continuing revelation.” “Continuing revelation” found its focus among Friends in a sense of “right relationship.” A sense of “right relationship” has permeated the entire ethical horizon of spiritual development since that time.

This shift in guidance from a fixed theological formula to an open horizon of on-going learning is now characteristic of many religious communities. We see it on every hand. For example, just this afternoon (December 25, 2006), on a visit to the animals in the live crèche of the United Church of Christ at 4th and Race Streets in Philadelphia, we saw a banner in the door yard that stated, “Don’t put a period where God puts a comma.” (Gracie Allen). Below these words of theological wisdom from a most unlikely source – an old time radio comedienne - even larger lettering proclaimed, “God is still speaking!” This shift in spiritual sensibility from closed knowledge to open learning, and from personal security to right relationship is now broadly evident across many communities of faith, as well as in the professions concerned with learning, human development, recovery, and healing. It is not immodest to say this shift was launched into the Christian tradition, in great part, by Quakerism.

It is no accident that Quakers have been pioneers in the learning professions and in the fields of human development. It is no accident that many Friends have been attracted to the sciences, and that scientists have been attracted to Quakerism. We may wonder why so much of modern social analysis, so many problem solving processes, and so many programs of contemporary social action that have no direct link to Friends sound like they come right out of Quakerism. In a real sense they do. If we study the shift in Western culture from a set world view to an evolving world view, from the certainty of eternal knowledge to an open horizon of learning, it is not difficult to see that the innovation in spiritual life that Friends launched is one of the primary sources of this change.

The cultural world of 17th century England was certainly primed in a variety of ways for this shift, but its articulation in Quakerism, and its advance within Quakerism’s enduring social form is an especially notable factor. Kenneth Boulding called this factor “the evolutionary potential of Quakerism.” His classic 1965 lecture under this title looks mostly to the future, but the concept applies with equal cogency to Quakerism’s past. The evolutionary potential of Quakerism has been a major factor in the unfolding of the human development, the human solidarity, and the human rights movements.

Quakers and the Ecological Shift

Another shift of similar magnitude is now underway, a shift that flows from the same learning ethos and now surrounds “right relationship” in the social domain with “right relationship” in the ecology of human adaptation. While corporate witness of the Society of Friends has not been at the forefront of this shift to ecologically sound adaptation, the spiritual ethos of “continuing revelation” and “right relationship” pioneered by Quakerism is part of the underlying warp on which the weaving of a new,
ecologically sound way of living on earth is being created. Add to this, the fact that many Friends have been professionally and personally active in this movement, and the “Quaker contribution” is even more clearly evident.

None-the-less, it seems important to ask whether Quakerism, at this time, and in this context, has an institutional voice that can help advance the ecological shift. Although Quakerism today is not likely to contribute another innovation comparable to its evolutionary ethos of “continuing revelation,” it does have a moral commitment to equity and environmental justice that is urgently needed in the articulation of ecological understanding, and in the promotion of ecologically sound behavior. Quakerism’s corporate voice can be appropriately focused on building the momentum of the ecological shift in a way that will equitably serve the peoples of earth and all earth’s communities of life.

Advancing the Evolutionary Potential of Quakerism

Is it possible that something like a corporate Quaker voice on the human-earth relationship and on the future of the human story may be in gestation? One way of approaching this question is to look at Friends testimonies in the light of ecological understanding. The following document attempts to do this.

Although I had been thinking about Friends testimonies in this way for a long time, I was prompted into action by a remark of Phil Emmi’s (Salt Lake City MM) during the formative period of Quaker Institute for the Future. At one point in our deliberations on the conflict between economics and ecology Phil was struck by the sense of a particular opportunity – a kind of opening. He sat up in his chair and said with emphasis, “We need Quaker testimonies for an organic world.” I thought, yes; as savvy as we may be about “greening” our way life, the question of a fully rounded and deeply assimilated ecological understanding often remains unexplored. Friends testimonies, extended into the ecological world view, offer an excellent opportunity to explore the concepts, relationships and behaviors that flow from a human-earth relationship centered in the integrity of Creation.

Because Friends testimonies have been expressed in various ways over time they are a rich ground work for reflection. I often think of Quakerism as a kind of greenhouse attached to the cathedral of Christendom. Working in as direct a light as possible, Friends have kept the beds of Quaker tradition rich with the humus of experience, nurturing various seeds of understanding into testimony and action. The testimonies are like sturdy plants taken out into the garden of the world and planted where, hopefully, they will yield a good crop. Parishioners and clergy of the great cathedral have often been seen strolling through the greenhouse soaking up the light and looking carefully at the plantings. The organic metaphor comes full circle in my tending of the testimonies here, and I hope this bit of “gardening” will help advance “the evolutionary potential of Quakerism.”

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Friends Testimonies and Ecological Understanding

The following outline offers some key words and phrases typically associated with Friends testimonies, along with additional reflections. Following each section on the testimony, is a second section in italics that gives a companion concept from the language of ecology, along with additional reflection that characterizes the testimony in the context of ecological understanding. The companion concept does not replace or in any way detract from the original testimony. It expands the testimony to encompass the ecological world view. To the usual five testimonies – simplicity, peace, equality, integrity, and community – a sixth has been added; service. Service is generally understood as implicit in the testimonies, but in this context, it is useful to give it distinct articulation.
Simplicity: Simplicity is often regarded as the testimony most directly related to an ecologically sound way of life. We think of simplicity as including a direct and functional approach to the arrangements of life and work, non-acquisitive, frugal, unadorned, spiritually centered, and attentive to direct experiences and relationships.

Simplicity is about focusing on relationships and processes that are basic to a well balanced life. In practice, this is not necessarily an uncomplicated way of living, but attentiveness to the complications of basic relationships and life maintenance processes creates a sense of wholeness that connects with simplicity at a fully rounded and deeply satisfying level.

The ecological corollary for simplicity is Subsidiarity: This means the anchoring of life and livelihood in local and regional communities. It means the production, use, and recycling of goods and services within local and regional economies. It means the practice of decision making and problem solving on issues of public interest at the level of the community involved. It is true, of course, that some activities and problem situations require to be addressed at national, international, and global levels. But the more of our life ways that can be centered in local and regional ecosystems, the more resilient and well balanced will be our personal lives, our household arrangements, and our communities. (Subsidiarity may be an unfamiliar term, but is of increasing importance for understanding and articulating the ecological world view. In general, it refers to bringing personal, community, and civic activities into direct, resilient, and sustainable relationship with the resources and processes that provide access to the means of life and life development. In short, ecologically sound adaptation.)

Peace: The peace testimony is probably best seen as a process, as a continual unfolding and reconfiguration of relationships that nurture and enhance the well being of the soul and of souls in community. Like happiness, peace emerges from right relationships. Because right relationships manifest in both personal life and in larger social forms, peace can emerge as both a personal process and as a larger social process. We think about the domain of peace as including nonviolent living, conflict prevention, conflict resolution, relationship building, reduction and elimination of the causes of conflict, violence and war.

The ecological corollary for the peace testimony may be thought of as the practice of an Ecologically Sound Human-Earth Relationship. Here, too, we see both a personal and a larger social process. At the personal and household level we can, to a certain extent, end – or at least greatly reduce – our participation in the “conquest of Nature.” However, the wider peace of a mutually enhancing human-earth relationship can only emerge when the social process of economic activity is reformulated around life-value enhancement. For example, a society that placed the well being of all children at the top of its priorities, that systematically promoted the organic enrichment of food producing soils, and that worked for the retention and restoration of forestlands and wetlands (among many other such programs of social and ecological value) would be moving from the war-like relationship with the earth that now often drives economic activity, to a right relationship in which a sense of peace with earth emerges. Within this context we would be developing ways of life and means of livelihood that do not violate ecosystem resilience and integrity, or depend on violent and exploitative control of resources. We would be aiming for a mutually enhancing human-earth relationship within a context of right sharing of resources.

Equality: Equality is perhaps the most difficult of the testimonies since it is obvious that real differences naturally occur between abilities at the personal level and between endowments at the social and geographic level. If we are tempted to question the testimony on equality because it seems to cut across the grain of natural evolution, we should remember that evolution can be seen working in a variety of ways, some of which appear to be inconsistent with others. The world of natural processes seems, at times, to encompass a kind of cross-grained conversation. For example, competition produces certain
kinds of results and cooperation produces others. But, on balance, competitive forces can only function on an underlying platform of cooperative relationships. Total competition, heedless of the social economy of cooperation, destroys its own context of operation.

Human emergence within the evolutionary process has been characterized by this underlay of cooperation. As human societies have played out their development within this context, the question of moral evolution has emerged into full view. It now seems clear we can choose various paths of social behavior within our evolutionary scenario. We have the ability to nurture, foster and draw out cooperative behavior, to advance this line of moral evolution and bring it ever more fully into practical realization. For example, Norway has chosen to eliminate poverty within its jurisdiction, and they did this before the benefit of North Sea oil revenue. Other jurisdictions, the United States, for example, have chosen to retain a social ecology and political economy that locks a significant number of people into the structural violence of poverty and life development deprivation.

Some people in Norway have more wealth than others, but nobody lives in poverty. This helps us look at equality in a different way. Inside the concept of equality we find the ethic of equity. In a practical working sense, equity can mean a fair share, a valued status, the prospect of a fulfilling and productive life. The testimony of equality thus opens into recognition and respect (in contrast to marginalization and devaluation). It looks for and helps to manifest human dignity. It holds human solidarity as its central moral compass. It aims at equitable access to the means of life and life development resources.

The ecological corollary for the testimony on equality can be seen in the new metaphor, Ecological Footprint. Ecological footprint research and quantitative analysis is now a well developed exercise and educative tool. In this application, I am drawing on its metaphorical power to lift up the concept of ecological equity. This concept provides an orientation toward a more equitable sharing of life space, and the more equitable distribution of life maintenance and life development resources. It guides us to a new kind of moral ecology, a moral ecology that includes the work of habitat, biodiversity, and cultural preservation and restoration. In the classic Quaker phrase, we are talking about “right sharing of world resources.” But the context of our preservation, restoration, and sharing is now the whole community of life.

Integrity: Integrity is perhaps the most easily understood of Friends testimonies. Some folks see it as a kind of lynch pin testimony, the presence of which vitalizes and validates all the other testimonies. At the first level it encompasses truthfulness and ethical consistency. In a widening perspective it includes devotion to right relationship, valuing direct experience in the formation of knowledge and judgment, and a particular commitment to accurate information.

The corollary for integrity is Ecological Sound Adaptation. This means ways of life and means of livelihood that are congruent with the resilience and functional integrity of the biotic environment. It means always working for, and in terms of, ecosystem enhancement and resilience. The ecological world view brings the integrity of Creation into the picture like a new operating platform, and thus establishes the full and necessary context in which to advance the great work of justice and peace.

Community: Community is such a basic phenomenon of human experience we may wonder how it came to be a distinct Quaker testimony. In the “old days,” in the original way of human social development, most forms of livelihood were embedded in neighborhood communities, and the spiritual community was pretty much the same as the livelihood community. The Protestant Reformation, and the subsequent Radical Reformation, of which Quakerism was a late expression, fractured and fragmented the Western European spiritual community. The subsequent Industrial Revolution uprooted many forms of livelihood from neighborhood communities, and the community way of living slipped into sharp decline.
In areas of England where considerable numbers of persons were drawn to Quakerism, and persecution by civil authorities attempted to stop the movement, the forms of community solidarity became an expression of faith. In North America, where Quaker settlements were clustered, the old ways of community association were often maintained. With the ascendancy of the commercial-industrial economy this has all changed. Community, instead of being a “commons” on which we can rely, has become problematic. It has become something we have to work to maintain and redevelop where it is lost.

Because the importance of community is so deeply imprinted in human experience as “right relationship,” the forms of community are always resurgent where people gather and work in the unity of Spirit for the common good. Authentic community provides mutual support relationships. It creates a bond of solidarity, and lives out a pattern of cooperative reciprocity. It involves a sharing of physical and spiritual commons. It provides for the ceremonial representation of social life – events that reflect and celebrate the significant aspects of the community way of life.

Largely because Friends have had an enduring concern for “right relationships,” and because Quakers have a well tended tradition of collaborative discernment in decision making, the soul of community has been kept alive, even though Meetings have generally suffered the same geographic dispersion of bodies as other faith groups. Community, thus becomes a special witness and a testimony of experience. This experience draws on the deepest and most engrained currents of human association, currents that may, at times, lift us into a sense of communion and Divine presence, currents that may also help us weather a sea of troubles.

The ecological dimension of community can be found in the dynamic of Social Ecology. Although Western philosophy and religion have restricted the social domain to human relations, natural history and the rise of ecological science have given us a new world view with regard to the nature of biotic relationships and what may be considered the realm of the social. Ecological and earth sciences have shown us that the biosphere in which we are embedded is permeated with an intricacy and interdependence of relationships that are intensely social.

This should not be surprising. Human relationship did not arise in one domain and all other biospheric relationships arise in another. The key insight of social ecology is that all biospheric relationships have arisen together in a mutually interacting and, generally, reinforcing way. Since we now have both a historic and a global view of biospheric relationships, and of human emergence within this context, we have the ability to act on behalf of the social ecology of the whole community of life. We should be guided to create – in the now oft repeated phrase – a mutually enhancing human-earth relationship. We need life and work designs that are fully responsive to environmental processes. We can set our sights on mindful participation in restoring and maintaining the health and resilience of our local and regional ecosystems. We can practice ecosystem reciprocity – responding to the circumstances of our local and regional environments in ways that serve the common good.

Service: Service is the orientation in which Friends testimonies come together in coherent expression. The ethos of service is obviously not unique to Friends, but Friends, characteristically, do not put service in a compartment of practice. For many Friends, service is life and life is service. Without deep reflection we seem to know from daily life that we exist for other people - and that they exist for us; that, at our best, we are bonded together in service to the common good. The testimony of service may be seen, in general terms, as a life and work orientation of contributing to human betterment. This, of course, encompasses the broad categories of human service work of all types, the provision of useful goods and services, public policy, civic, and political engagement, and working for social justice and economic security in many ways.
Stewardship is a corollary concept and practice that bridges the service orientation into the full ecological context in which we actually live and work. Once again, repeating much of what has already been lifted into consideration, we can see that stewardship involves a life and work orientation of contributing to a mutually enhancing human-earth relationship; for example, ecosystem restoration, energy use conservation, transitioning from nonrenewable to renewable energy and materials, local production for local use, green building, environmental education, ecological footprint reduction, and overall ecologically sound economic adaptation.

The question may come why all this economics and ecology should be seen as a spiritual concern relating to Friends testimonies. The answer is pretty straightforward. Our spiritual traditions, and our experience, teach us that in right relationship we touch the fullness of human meaning and the presence of the Divine. In both an ordinary and in a deeply profound sense, economics and ecology are domains of relationship. They are the primary domains of relationship in which we carry on the human story. Economics is the domain of relationship in which the moral content of our faith enters most fully into the service of the world. Ecology is the domain of relationship that places the human story in the fullness of its cosmic significance and, at the same time, provides a Spirit filled orientation on how best to live on earth.

Endnote: The concept of a “mutually enhancing human-earth relationship,” which is central to this discussion, was first advanced by Thomas Berry. His books include, The Dream of Earth, The Universe Story, The Great Work, and Evening Thoughts

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September 2007
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