



Lecture 1934

William Penn

*Tradition
and
Progress*

Harold E. B. Speight

William Penn Lecture 1934

Tradition and Progress

Delivered at
RACE STREET MEETING HOUSE
Philadelphia

by
Harold E. B. Speight
Dean of Men
Swarthmore College

Published by The Book Committee
Religious Society of Friends
Philadelphia and Vicinity
302 Arch Street, Philadelphia

The William Penn Lectures are supported by the Young Friends Movement of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, which was organized on Fifth month thirteenth, 1916, at Race Street Meeting House in Philadelphia, for the purpose of closer fellowship; for the strengthening by such association and the interchange of experience, of loyalty to the ideals of the Society of Friends; and for the preparation by such common ideals for more effective work thru the Society of Friends for the growth of the Kingdom of God on earth.

The name of William Penn has been chosen because he was a Great Adventurer, who in fellowship with his friends started in his youth on the holy experiment of endeavoring “to live out the laws of Christ in every thought, and word, and deed,” that these might become the laws and habits of the State.

Requests for permission to quote or to translate should be addressed to:

Pendle Hill Publications
338 Plush Mill Road
Wallingford, PA 19086-6023
Email: publications@pendlehill.org

Copyright © 2021 by Pendle Hill

ISBN:

ebook design by the [Quaker Heron Press](#)—2021

“The liberal mind is the large mind, to which every age of human endeavor is alike instinct with truths and with truths indispensable to subsequent progress. It is the mind that knows how to penetrate the secret intent and darkling meaning of the past, and to read the present as the fulfillment of what was there foretold, however dimly or stammeringly. It is the mind that realizes its own inadequacy and dependence, and that has learned how to supplement its individual incompleteness by freely assimilating into its own growth something of the accumulated wisdom of the past and of the manifold experience of the present.”

George Holmes Howison.

Tradition and Progress

I

There are two very different, yet closely related, prerogatives of the human mind which are responsible, separately and in their interplay, for a very great many of our most cherished spiritual achievements and possessions. The one is *memory*, the ability to recall past experience, to live again through our yesterdays, sad or happy, and to keep within our grasp something of the reality of events which recede from us on the banks of the stream of life as we move with the stream. The other is *hope*. Through hope we see some of the future's possibilities while still they lie in a realm which only the imagination can penetrate; we anticipate with satisfaction changes which, if they do come, will bring us still greater satisfaction; we reach out to that which we should like to believe the banks of the stream of life yet will bring to us. .

These two, memory and hope, are prerogatives which distinguish man from the lower animals. They release man from confinement within the narrow, cell-like habitation of Present Time; by virtue of memory he lingers in the Past, and by virtue of hope he hastens into the Future; for him the Present is simply the moment of their meeting in his consciousness.

Yet for the privileges of this freedom to range beyond the boundaries of the immediate experience of the present, man pays a heavy price. Sometimes the price is too great for him to face, as when memory brings him only remorse or when imagination of the future only enslaves him to fear. But even

for those whose memories are happy and whose hopes are bright the price is not negligible. There is a sense of conflict as we feel drawn alternately or simultaneously in two directions, now to rest in the pleasures of memory, now to exert ourselves under the stimulus of hope. Some people yield to the first impulse. They take refuge from changing reality by the simple expedient of recalling the Past, which seems (as they look back) to have provided a much more simple existence. If this mood becomes habitual, it is accompanied by resentment against the passing of time and against the invasion of factors which make for change. The golden age is seen by these people in the past. It becomes more and more clear to them that modern life involves at every point a sad betrayal of a glorious inheritance.

Other people yield to the opposing impulse. Their discontent with the present is born of their hope for something better; they find their peace (while they spoil the peace of everyone about them) in an imaginative and romantic construction of a brave new world to be. If this mood becomes habitual, it is accompanied by their increasing scorn for the processes and institutions which perpetuate the past. For them the golden age is in the future. What now exists appears more and more clearly to them to be only a preparation or foundation for what better men will make tomorrow. To change the figure, the area of present effort is valued as only a training-ground for the battalions of reform.

Yet, if we can only, even for a moment, resist both impulses in their more extreme forms and insist on seeing life steadily and seeing it whole, we must surely realize that life at its best demands both impulses. They may be said to be the impulses

which lead respectively to preservation of the type and to change and improvement of the type. Life demands *both* that the structures, forms, and functions of today and tomorrow shall be organically continuous with those of yesterday, *and* that they shall change. Further, life demands that the tension between the two impulses, preservation and change, between memory and hope, between tradition and progress, shall remain. Indeed, where there is no tension there is no life. If we obey either impulse alone we cut ourselves off from life's continuity; if we seek to escape the struggle between tradition and progress, either by retreating into tradition or by living as if there were no traditions, we isolate ourselves in an unreal world, and that means death.

II

Religion being concerned with universal and permanent interests of mankind, we should naturally expect to find that religion exhibits clearly these two impulses characteristic of human life. We might, of course, illustrate them by referring to other interests, such as politics, literature, art, social life. But we shall confine ourselves here to religion.

Centuries before Christ there was a developed religion in Northern Judea. It was a religion marked by many features which were inherited from primitive conditions of life, and one of these features was the belief in various forms of magic. The priests were, in effect, "Medicine Men" and knew the formulae by which hostile divine powers could be propitiated, and friendly powers kept in good humor.

The worshipper was primarily interested in the proper performance of the sacred rites which would guarantee his security, his land's fertility, his tribe's success in war. His religion embodied his inherited ideas; it did not change them, nor even challenge them. One day there was a festival at a place called Bethel, which meant House of God, and about which was preserved the tradition that it was the spot at which Jacob had seen his vision of angels ascending and descending upon a ladder reaching from earth to heaven and had heard the divine promise that his children's children, the Israelite people, should be as the dust of the earth for multitude and spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south. Yes, it was a holy place, and pious people flocked from the surrounding countryside to the happy festival. The ceremonies were in the hands of the priests, and as long as the peasant folk brought to the altars the first fruit of their farms without questioning the authority of the priests, no one raised any questions about the justice of the social system under which they lived.

No one? For a long time no questions were asked. Tradition was too strong. The embodied memories of the race, hardened into institutions, had a sanctity which made it a sacrilege to doubt their power over men's lives. But on this one day the unexpected happened. Among the crowds a voice was heard raised in condemnation of the luxury and immorality of the rich, the indifference of the privileged, priests and laymen alike, towards the poor. It was the voice of a young man clad in shepherd's garb, a simple herdsman and fruit-picker from the hills. He used forthright language in describing the sins of those he denounced, language so

vivid that it is part of the immortal literature of the world. They “sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes.” Bribery and corruption, wild revelry, degrading customs, falsification of the currency, plain robbery, none of these things seemed to be recognized, even by the priests, as inconsistent with religious zeal. Sarcastically he cried: “Come to Bethel, and transgress; at Gilgal.”—another sacred spot— “multiply transgression; and bring your sacrifices every morning, and your tithes after three years.”

But denunciation was not all this young social and religious rebel was capable of, for we find him appealing, almost tenderly and certainly with eloquence, to the best instincts of the people who hear him. “Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live... hate the evil, and love the good, and establish justice in the earth.... Thus saith the Lord, I hate, I despise, your feast days, and I delight not in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings, I will not accept them.... Take away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let justice run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.”

This was too much for the priests’ trade-union! The chief priest confronted young Amos and ordered him out of the city. Priest and prophet stood, as so often since they have stood, face to face. Proud and scornful, the priest suggested that the young peasant belonged to one of the bands of professional “prophets,” or seers, whose success in unofficial magic was depleting the coffers of the privileged priests— “O thou seer, go, flee thee away into the land of Judah, and there eat bread, and prophesy there. But prophesy not any more at Bethel; for it is the king’s chapel, and it is the king’s

court.” But even this powerful combination of political power and ecclesiastical privilege could not silence Amos, and, protesting that he was no prophet, “or yet a prophet’s son, but only a herdman and a gatherer of sycamore fruit, and owed his convictions to no professional group, the young man proceeded to pronounce the doom of a people incapable of moral improvement, complacent and satisfied in their unthinking luxury and oppression of the poor.

I have dwelt on this historic incident because it is typical of the effective protest which, in the name of a higher (because ethically sensitive) religion, challenges the blind traditions and indiscriminating ceremonials of a lower type of religion. Here is one of the great moments of tension between memory and hope. Traditions, satisfying because they made slight ethical demands on the pious Israelite, were challenged by a new conception of life in which human rights claimed attention; in the name of a higher standard of living a new voice claimed freedom for those who had never spoken for themselves. The representative of tradition could only say, “Go flee thee away to Judah... *there* prophesy.” But the word had been spoken and it could not be recalled. Stone, crucify, the prophet if you will, but once he has spoken the walls of tradition are never as strong; they may not fall at his word, but they are shaken. The voice of memory may yet again appeal, but it cannot persuade us to silence the new voice of hope. It was words like those of Amos, preserved and quoted long after he had become an almost legendary figure, that awakened and kept alive a great hope in the hearts of the Jews, a hope that made and still makes history.

More familiar, and fraught with greater consequences, altogether more definite in the opposition of tradition and progress, are the words of Jesus in what we call the Sermon on the Mount. "Ye have heard that it hath been said.... But I say unto you." Tradition says thus and so, but I declare that tradition is not enough. So far as the young herdsman of Tekoa is concerned, we do not know whether he did flee to the safety of Judah. He may have yielded, though that is unlikely. But of Jesus we know that he did go south into Judah, and to Jerusalem, its capital, by his time the seat and center of a highly formalized and centralized religion, controlled by rich and powerful priests and politicians. And to go to Jerusalem was to go deliberately to his death. Tradition seemed to win when he was crucified, but ere long groups of men and women were gathering in the name of the slain prophet, and when it became clear that their loyalty to him conflicted with the requirements of the authorities these followers of Christ boldly said, "We must obey God rather than men."

The strength of the impulse which checks traditional controls over life has been demonstrated over and over again in human history. There has been an "apostolic succession" of rebels and heretics, men who have shown the inadequacy of the traditions under which they grew up, men who by their dramatic words and deeds have stimulated others to look beyond the boundaries of custom and dogma. Our debt to them can never be told and it can be paid only by the perpetuation of their spirit, the emulation of their courage.

Yet so strong are the claims of the impulses under which we cherish and perpetuate what has been that even the words

and the works of great rebels often become authoritative codes and dogmas to those who come after them.

For illustration of this we may turn to the early Christian communities, composed in the first instances of Jews but gradually absorbing more and more persons to whom Jewish ways of life and thought were strange. As the new elements were brought in, bringing with them “new” ideas, ideas new to the Jewish sect they joined but not new in Greek tradition, some of the leaders among the followers of Jesus, particularly those who had not traveled beyond Palestine or enjoyed much contact with the larger world, actually took the position that people could not become Christians unless they took on themselves the marks of the Jew. They were, in short, Jewish-Christians and they resented the growth of Christian communities in Syria and Asia Minor. They even went so far as to send emissaries to the places where Paul had established churches to undermine his leadership by suggesting that he was perverting the original gospel. Finally the issue had to be joined, and Paul, a Jew but a Jew educated outside Palestine, a man of cosmopolitan mind, went to Jerusalem and stood his ground against the pressure of the conservatives. He has told us about this struggle and he claimed afterwards that an agreement was reached between himself and Peter. Paul should be free to go to non-Jews and should lay upon them only the most essential of the Jewish laws; Peter and his party should give their message to Jews. But Paul tells us Peter still insisted on obedience to the Jewish law.

It was this important issue which gave Paul the theme of his most argumentative letters, but it suggested also some of the

immortal passages to which we still turn when we want to state the superiority of the free spirit over bondage to the letter of law. The discussion Paul engaged in shows us how readily some men charged with a revolutionary teaching banked the fires of their ardor for change and settled down to make of their gospel simply a new tradition. Paul had to show them that “he is a keeper of the law who is one inwardly; and whose observance is that of the heart, in spirit, not in the letter, whose praise is not of men, but of God.” He went so far as to point out that “apart from the ceremonies of the law” there had been manifested a righteousness superior to that of mere obedience, “righteousness through faith.” Under the law, that is, when living by tradition, men were living as if under a guardian or attendant, whose only function was to bring them to a good teacher as a slave conducted a rich man’s son to school. Now, however, they had been set free from law and tradition that they might serve, “not in oldness of the letter but in newness of the spirit.” And once this spirit took hold of a human heart, bringing forth the “fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, long suffering, kindness, self-control,” the law was set aside; “against such there is no law.” So Paul wrote to his friends who were in danger of choosing the easy way of making their religion a matter of forms and rites and statutory regulation, “Stand fast in the freedom wherewith Christ hath made you free; be not entangled in any yoke of bondage. Ye were called for freedom.”

Everywhere in the history of religion, whether it be written in books or open only to the eye of the student who can interpret institutions, there is evidence of the danger which

besets every fresh movement of the human spirit just so soon as men organize to further the new cause. This is the danger that what was once startlingly novel may be set up as a standard of belief, speech, or behavior to which all must conform. Feet that once took bold steps in the way of progress become victims of a creeping paralysis. Reformers, like Lot's wife, "look back" and become stationary "pillars," sad reminders that once there was movement where now all is dead. And, as Jesus long ago suggested, the very men who nullify what the prophet achieved are readiest to build his monument. That is the easiest way to lay his ghost!

No dissenting movement has ever, so far as I know, quite escaped this danger. The Puritans attempted to stem the tide of formalism in the parish churches of England. They exercised the right of private judgment in the face of fierce laws sponsored by Archbishop Laud. But when they finally withdrew in large numbers to these shores and set up their theocratic commonwealth, the Massachusetts Bay Colony, they were even more severe towards Quakers, Anabaptists and other disturbing people than Laud and his bishops had been towards the Puritans. Repudiating the ceremonies forced on them in England, they set up in the New World just as rigid an enforcement of forms of belief and speech and everyday behavior, most of them based on a misreading of Scripture. What crimes were committed against freedom by these exiles who crossed the sea "in search of larger liberty!"

In the same seventeenth century which saw liberty-loving Puritans carrying the poison of intolerance in their cargoes of freedom to new lands, a more radical and thoroughgoing

movement of dissent arose in England and was organized into a closely-knit community. I refer, of course, to the Society of Friends. At great cost in terms of personal security or of freedom, of social approval, of health, of fortune, the early Friends set forth a new way of life which can perhaps be summarily described by saying that it exalted the individual conscience above social and political regulation of life, called on the individual to be sincere in speech and bearing, repudiated all personal advantage gained at the expense of another's welfare, and eliminated all the ornamentation of life which could in any way jeopardize the integrity of the soul.

Inevitably the modes of expression chosen by Friends in their earnest desire to live up to these ideals made them a peculiar people, the butt of ridicule and the occasion of persecution. Very soon the peculiar customs adopted for the sake of principle came to have a value apart from the principle they exemplified. The novel behavior which, when they adopted it, they offered to others as a way of life, had a value because the peculiarities of speech, dress, and behavior served to unite the group into a strong community life. It promoted the group-spirit. At the same time it served as a protection for the group against influences which might undermine its loyalty, especially when the ardor of the first days of costly testimony were past.

As time went on, of course, there were those who, unaware of the original purpose of the Quaker customs and living under conditions very different from those prevailing when the customs were established, began to ask why they should meticulously observe them as their grandfathers had done.

Evidently they did not always take the trouble to ask this question, for the Epistles of Yearly Meetings show that leading Friends were exercised in the early eighteenth century—as they often were in later years—about the “declension among too many of the professors of truth from that Christian plainness and humble deportment” which “ancient Friends were exemplary in” (1745). “It is a matter of exceeding grief and concern to many of the faithful among us to observe how far that exemplary plainness of habit, speech, and deportment, *which distinguished our forefathers*, and for which they patiently underwent the reproach and contradiction of sinners, are now departed from by too many under our name” (1753).

Rufus Jones has pointed out (*Later Periods of Quakerism*, Vol. I, pp. 177 ff.) that “the arguments that were used tended more and more, as time went on, to treat plainness as an end in itself, as a religious form possessing in itself some mysterious and ineffable efficacy.... It came, however, very easily to be a form, indeed a quite dead form... it was sometimes a mere show of a sanctity that did not in reality exist. Like all external symbols and forms, it fell easily into being a positive hindrance to genuine spiritual life. Too often it led to arrested development and allowed the wearer of the garb to stop with the sign of the attainment without pushing forward actually to attain.”

III

There are times when we are weary of the difficult task of reconciling opposites. The “opposites” may be contradictory propositions, each of which seems from one point of view to

be true; or they may be conflicting impulses in ourselves, each of which seems to lead to real satisfactions. In such moods we are strongly tempted to choose one or the other of the alternatives and stake everything on it. And many there are who surrender when faced with this temptation. There seems to be a solution open to us by adopting one or the other of the alternatives, committing ourselves to it, and marshalling all our powers of rationalization to defend the choice once it has been made.

On political issues, for example, which, if they mean anything to us at all, are likely to bear rather closely on our security and welfare, and therefore to arouse our emotions, we quite commonly see men escape in this way from their painful suspicion that perhaps both parties have some right on their side. "What can I accomplish," a man asks, "if I do not throw in my lot with one party or the other?" More probably a man does not consciously ask this question, but he is driven, by his inability or unwillingness to ask and answer it, into a choice. Once the choice is made, he is encouraged by his own pride as well as by group-spirit into believing it was a really vital choice between darkness and light, truth and error, good policy and subversive doctrine. Such a situation is encountered in connection with that other human concern which deeply affects our emotions. I mean religion. Here also, when men are faced with two possible policies, each of which has something, if not much, to be said for it, they are tempted to adopt one or the other, invest the one with all the virtues and condemn the other as the most dangerous of errors, finding excellent reasons for a choice which was not actually determined by reasons at all.

This it is that leads some men to become ardent “traditionalists,” others to be ardent “progressives.” It is a curious fact that in a time of general enlightenment, when one might expect the pressure of modernism to turn men away from the more extreme forms of traditionalism in religion, a good many educated people enter the Church of Rome. Perhaps the reason is that it is in just such times as ours that men are perplexed and torn between the alternatives of authority and freedom. Towards freedom they are drawn by the variety of opinion apparently open to them; it is intoxicating for a while to feel that all the possible interpretations of life may be explored without let or hindrance. Towards authority, on the other hand, they are drawn by the discovery that no interpretation can ever be really the result of “private judgment”; for into all “private” judgments (as we call them) go the results of other people’s experience and convictions. And the organized life of any group well-equipped for the discovery and perpetuation of truth appeals to them as an authority to which the baffled individual may turn when the range of possible beliefs becomes confusingly wide.

Those who, having made their choice, are anxious to justify it—sometimes giving a suggestion of their remaining doubts by the very violence of their espousal of one party or the other—find no difficulty in marshalling arguments to support their choice. Read, for example, the defense of the Anglo-Catholic position by one who has turned in that direction after an education which opened up to him the speculations of modern thought. Or read the manifestos of those whose temperament has led them to an equally extreme

“Humanism” in which the central traditions of the Christian Church are repudiated. One of the two will perhaps appeal to you more than the other. You may conceivably find it appeals to you because it offers a way of escape from the strain and fatigue of perplexing questions.

For example, you may find it appealing to be told, as we are told by an Anglo-Catholic preacher of our time, that “there has been throughout the ages no change whatever in any of man’s essential problems or attitudes”; that while we modern Athenians are ever ready to hear or to tell some new thing the “confusing babble” of modern voices “has eased no human woe, added to life neither laughter nor loveliness, changed not at all anything that really matters,” for “man changes not at all.” It is only his “mad conceit” that enables man to forget that by changing his houses, clothes, table manners, machinery, and “the verbal imagery in which he states his old bewilderment,” he in reality “changes not at all.” The task of the church is, we are told, to serve unchanging human nature by offering it the reinforcements, the supernatural guidance and legislation, the unchanging truth and the living fellowship of a great historic institution. And the value of this “treasure which our fathers have bequeathed us,” to use the words of the Anglo-Catholic leader I have been quoting, resides largely in the great age and historic continuity of the institution of the Church. “Among those institutions which existed in the ancient world, the Christian Church alone has continued through the centuries, a living thing. The beauty that was Hellas was noble, but is dead. The mystery that was Egypt is entralling; but it smells of mummy dust. The power that was Rome is a

dream, enshrined in ruins and old books. The Christian Church, born at Pentecost, alone of ancient kingdoms and institutions survives. Indeed, what we know today of ancient things—the things which men call ‘classical’—we know mostly through the Church. It has been she who has preserved the relics of the past and colored them — happily—in her own good pigments. She has helped us to remember Greek grace and the clarity of Greek thought, and to forget, as a bad dream, the sensual degradation which corroded that beauty. She recalls to us the romance of Egypt, the while we grieve for the slaves who groaned beneath the lash along the Nile. She brings to us the vigor and the sturdiness of Roman living, and mercifully does not remind us of Rome’s Cruelty and heartless exploitation. The ancient days live in the Church and are redeemed thereby.”¹

There you have the complacent sense of Superiority, not to say arrogance, of institutionalism or traditionalism. The extreme traditionalist is always sure that the particular tradition he cherishes is one which surpasses, or at least preserves the best in, all other traditions. He may be so eloquent in his tribute to the tradition—even in his gross distortion of history—as to deceive himself as well as his hearers. His confidence in the supreme value of the institution which has given him shelter, peace, and security is touching—at least to minds which feel the need of shelter, peace, and security. The artistry of his version of history, in which the legacies of Egypt, Greece and Rome are pictured as valuable only as they come to us bearing the Stigmata of the Church’s influence, may almost paralyze the critical powers of the reader.

To exemplify the force of the opposing impulse we have a wide choice of materials. A certain type of sociological and psychological study exalts the capacities of man, rational thinking man, and tells the story of human history in terms of man's conquest over superstitious traditions. In a book entitled *Man's Own Show: Civilization*, Dr. Dorsey takes nine hundred and fifty pages to survey human history and substantiates, to his own satisfaction, the judgment that "the less man thinks about God the more Godlike he becomes" (p. 191), that it is "common sense" that will lay the foundations on earth for a Paradise to be built here; that we have "already paid too much for inspirations"; that "the nature of God is the nature of Man," since the religious spirit creates gods "to serve human desires." This is characteristic of the "humanist" conviction that "there is no power outside of man himself that fashions individual character and human society."

Those who are satisfied with this disposition of a rather far-reaching issue proceed to say they are not concerned with the origin of things but with their end, and that they "enthroned deity in the human heart rather than in the stars." Humanism, in the words of one of its exponents, "takes humanity and glorifies and idealizes it with the attributes of a God." For the humanist "the future lies wide open before us, to do with it what we will... We can mark out our own goal and choose our path to that goal, and no power outside of ourselves can defeat the purpose of man."

I do not intend to examine this view here and now. I am content to state it. It appeals, does it not, to our faith in progress, to our hope and dream of improvements in the

20

conditions of human life? It dismisses the “burden of superstition which religions carry, the impedimenta of marching humanity, and it enlists our intelligence and goodwill in causes to which we can readily give of ourselves and of our substance. It is so simple, and it solves—or for the moment seems to solve—so many perplexities which speculation only intensifies!

IV

We may well ask now whether the solution for man’s spirit really is to be found in an escape from the tension and conflict generated by the opposition of these impulses in human nature. Is peace, peace achieved by enthroning *either* tradition *or* desire for change, what we want? Or, and this is more important, is it what we need, is it what is best for us? I think not. Vitality is found only where there is tension; life is sustained only through tension. The spiritual life, if it is to be a complete life, must find a place for both memory and hope, for both tradition and change; not by the surrender of one to the other, nor by a compromise in which each loses its peculiar value, but by keeping them in articulate opposition, keeping each alert to the dangers of the other.

Suppose, for example, that within any religious body there are those who greatly value the traditions of the group, who are temperamentally inclined to ask of each oncoming generation that it cherish the sense of continuity with the past by preserving customs and memories and ways of thought dear to men and women of an earlier day; and suppose that there are others in whom the impulse to change is stronger, Who are impatient whenever a new idea is measured by its

likeness to or difference from ideas prevailing in the past, and who are inclined to prefer new ways just because they are unimpaired by traditional (and therefore emotional) associations. Is it best for the life of the whole group that one or the other of the temperamentally opposed parties, so to speak, should prevail over the other?

Does the man who cherishes group-memories, that is traditions, want to see everyone content to seek in tradition the answer to every question? Does he indeed prefer that questions should never be asked? Surely that would be most unwise, for all about him will be men and women affected profoundly by changes which inevitably come and must be faced. If he cannot face them, if he must always retreat into ready-made answers, he will be impotent in a world he wishes to help.

On the other hand, does the man whose first thought is progress, who is sensitive to the need for change, want to see others constantly employed in promoting change? Does he want men to believe that to be going somewhere else is at all times better than to be doing something worthwhile where they are? Does he want to give his undivided energy to formulating and answering questions, solving problems?

Surely that would be unwise, for men do not live by questions alone, nor are men always “problems” to themselves or to others. For a large part of their time they are craftsmen maintaining the fabric of the world; they are members of families who find deep satisfactions in the bonds which bind them to their forbears, and in what they can hand on to those who are to come after them. They cannot find

complete satisfaction in exploration of the new unless they carry into the new some treasures of the old. They must take with them some skills, knowledge, insight, equipment, and accumulated race-experience which, in the new realms opened by pioneering courage, can contribute stability and a sense of security to those who are to build there.

So it is to the advantage of any religious body that it has within it both impulses; that it gives to each its task and values both; that it calls on each to contribute something distinctive to the common life. If unity within the Society of Friends meant uniformity, if “branches” representing variety of viewpoint were eliminated by the victory of one or the other of these two fundamental attitudes, the loss of vitality would be irreparable. That is what was not understood a hundred years ago. Those who saw danger in change and those who felt superior to tradition were at least alike in that they made the mistake of supposing that their own way of thought ought to prevail! And opposition, the tension between tradition and progress, resulted as we know in division, with consequent loss of life.²

In such situations both sides lose, not only because the desire for victory generates bitterness, but because each needed the other for its own complete life. The traditionalist, offering the great values of continuity, of organic contact with the past, whether in belief or in conduct, needs the criticism of the advocate of change. Only so can he discriminate between traditions that are a source of life and strength and traditions that are an unmeaning burden and a hindrance. Only as this discrimination is fearlessly exercised can the range and meaning of truth be increased from age to age. The

“progressive,” on the other hand, offering to the group his alert critical powers and his interest in new needs as they arise, is always in danger of doing more harm than good if he loses respect for and sympathy with what has been wrought into the thought and conduct of mankind through generations of effort, if he is scornful of the discipline of organized life, or if he expects others to want change for the sake of change and is incapable of understanding how they can sincerely prefer the established routine.

The gestures of reconciliation which in recent years have suggested our sense of the urgent need for true unity among Friends represent, we may be sure, especially among young Friends, the desire for a close cooperation, a cooperation in which may be once and for all forgotten the mistaken desire of our forerunners to see victorious one or the other of the impulses we have been considering. It would be enough to point out, even if there were no other consideration, that branches of the Society of Friends, at least as viewed by a newcomer or by those outside the Society, do not now actually represent (even if they ever did represent) the two impulses. In other words, each “branch” has within it those who incline to emphasize the inheritance from the past and by reference to this inheritance to judge the soundness of all new ideas and has also some who are impelled by hope to find better ways. Divisions once felt to be vastly important no longer represent adequately the differences on which they were once based. Those who have not inherited a respect for the divisions and therefore can view them only objectively ask why a Friend should be expected to be either this or that kind of a Friend.

But this does not mean that the distinctive values—so far as they exist—which are represented by differences of viewpoint should be at once submerged in an outward union. Such a union of organization, to which we could point with pride, might be very precarious; it would be precarious if its continued existence depended on our willingness not to mention in tones above a whisper the opposing points of view it included. Outward union can be profitable only as the expression of inner unity; and unity is achieved only by men who know their own limitations, respect the convictions of others, and desire to work with others for a larger good than either they or others could find alone.

Matthew Arnold once said that culture “is the pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock of notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically.”

Can we not translate this into terms of our discussion today, and say, religious culture is the pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know and appreciating, in terms of our duty and destiny, the best which has been thought and said and done in human history on all matters which most deeply concern us, and, through this knowledge and appreciation, turning a stream of fresh and free conviction upon those notions and impulses and habits which we now

follow staunchly but blindly, vainly believing that our loyalty to them makes up for the mischief of our blindness?

Such a conception of religious culture gives a place to memory and to hope; to tradition—all that is known of what the best have done—and to progress; to the conservative, without whom we should lose touch with the past, and to the progressive, without whom we should stagnate where we are. It is such a conception of religious life which permits us to work with those who are different from ourselves in method though united in purpose. It gives us ground for believing that further and greater steps may be taken in loving unity not only without surrender of conviction, but to its lasting enrichment.

Notes

1. *Men Wanted.* by Bernard I. Bell. Harper and Brothers pp 71-2.
2. The reference is, of course, to the division of the Society of Friends into “orthodox” and liberal, or Hicksite, Friends.

About the Author

Harold E. B. Speight, Dean of Men at Swarthmore College. Dean Speight is the editor of "Creative Lives," a series of biographies. Since 1927 he has been literary editor of the "Christian Leader." The speaker was assistant professor of logic and metaphysics of the University of Aberdeen from 1909 to 1910 and a fellow of Manchester College, Oxford, from 1910-1912. In 1912 he was ordained to the Unitarian ministry and served several churches in England, British Columbia, and the United States. He became professor of philosophy at Dartmouth in 1927 and professor of biography in 1929. Since 1933 he has been at Swarthmore College, having resigned from the Unitarian ministry to become a member of the Society of Friends.

About the Lectures

The William Penn Lectures started as a ministry of the Young Friends' Movement of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. In the beginning of the last century, "Young Friends" was the community of young adults from both the Hicksite and the Orthodox Philadelphia Yearly Meetings, which reunited in 1955. The Young Friends Movement began the lecture series "for the purpose of closer fellowship; for the strengthening by such association and the interchange of experience, of loyalty to the ideals of the Society of Friends; and for the preparation by such common ideals for more effective work through the Society of Friends for the growth of the Kingdom of God on Earth." The name of William Penn was chosen because the Young Friends Movement found Penn to be "a Great Adventurer, who in fellowship with his friends started in his youth on the holy experiment of endeavoring 'To live out the laws of Christ in every thought, and word, and deed; and that these might become the laws and habits of the State.'"

The first run of William Penn Lectures were given between 1916 and 1966, and are warmly remembered by Friends who attended them as occasions to look forward to for fellowship with our community, inspiration, and a challenge to live into our faith. The lectures were published by the Book Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting has granted Pendle Hill and Quaker Heron Press permission to reproduce the lectures as free ebooks.

Although it was [announced](#) in 1960 that the series would be discontinued several lectures were published in the early '60s. It appears that the lectures given between 1923 and 1931 were never published. If we come upon manuscripts of these lectures, we hope to publish them in future.

In 2010, the Young Adult Friends of PYM revived the series, officially launching the second run of the William Penn Lectures in 2011. [The series was renamed](#) the *Seeking Faithfulness* series in 2016, as part of the Young Adult Friends of PYM's concern for dismantling racism within the yearly meeting and the wider society. It no longer felt rightly ordered to have a major event named after a slaveholder. The [Seeking Faithfulness](#) series is hosted by the Young Adult Friends for the benefit of the whole yearly meeting community, and invites a Friend to challenge us all to explore new ways to practice our Quaker faith. The Seeking Faithfulness series seeks to nourish our spiritual lives and call us to faithful witness in our communities and throughout the world.