

Sonnie's vision of what the Religious Society of Friends could become was firmly rooted in our tradition. She did not cling to tradition for the sake of sentiment or antiquarianism, but because she found in the past faithful examples of listening to God, and living in faithful community under the leadership of Christ. The following article appeared in the fall 1989 Festival Quarterly, a Mennonite publication.

Finding a Usable Past

by Sandra Cronk

Contemporary Friends are in search of a "usable past," a vision of our Quaker heritage which will help us understand God's call to faithfulness in the present. The fact that we are looking for such a vision indicates that we do not always find the past very helpful to us today.

Seeking Support From the Past

A large part of our ambivalence about the past comes from the preconceptions we bring with us when we look at it and thereby measure its usefulness to us now.

We would like the past to support one particular view of Quaker life. Some Friends look to the past in support of their view that the heart of Quaker faith is found in the inward spiritual life. These Friends look for images of prayer, worship and the use of silence and meditation. Other Friends are eager to see what early Quaker testimonies about prison reform, the abolition of slavery, simple living and peacemaking have to say to a contemporary Quakerism built around a life of involvement in a needy world. Still other Quakers see the heart of Quakerism in its classical church-communities of discipline and accountability. They look for help from the past in the building of corporate structures of obedience in our contemporary, overly individualistic, lives.

It is easy to reject, or simply not see, the part of the past which does not support our particular view of Quakerism. We can make use of our views of the past in the struggle to make our view of Quakerism become the dominant one today. For example, we may dismiss those interested in the inward life as having become part of today's individualistic value system, abandoning traditional understandings of church-community. Or we may dismiss the traditional communities characterized by plain dress and plain speech as irrelevant to a Quakerism actively involved with the needs of the larger world.

The Radical Voice of the Past

A remarkable development has occurred recently. Through new historical and theological work,(1) we have gained insights which unsettle our previous assumptions about the past and make us hear God's call to faithfulness in deeper ways. We find that the past is speaking to us with a radical voice.

"Radical" has two definitions in the dictionary. It can mean being related to the root or origin--what is fundamental. It also means being marked by a considerable departure from the usual or traditional.

When the word "radical" is applied to the past, these two definitions seem at first glance to be contradictory. How can going back to the origin mean overturning tradition? We are accustomed to thinking that roots and tradition are the same. Yet Friends are learning that when we hear the radical voice of the past it can take us back to what is fundamental and, in the process, overturn our views of tradition. Even more disconcertingly, it can overturn all our categories of contemporary Quaker life.

The Apocalyptic Root of Friends

The particular root of the Society of Friends which has had such a profound effect on our communities of late has been the apocalyptic framework of the early Quaker movement in England. The Book of Revelation (which we hardly read today) was one of the favorite books of the Bible for the early Friends. I understand that scholars of the early Anabaptist movements are finding similar apocalyptic roots in that heritage as well.

Many Friends greeted these historical findings with non-comprehension at first. The word “apocalyptic” brings to mind images of people waiting on a hillside for the end of the world or of the not entirely convincing parallels which some interpreters see between symbols in the Book of Revelation and specific events in our own era. But a dismissal of all apocalyptic themes dismisses Jesus’ ministry, which centered on the coming kingdom as a real event in our lives.

It took some time for Friends to be able to understand that the apocalyptic emphasis in Quaker thought was a prophetic protest against an unfaithful world, turned away from God and rushing headlong toward death and destruction. This apocalyptic faith was also a witness to God’s power to inaugurate the promised kingdom. In today’s world, which hovers on the brink of nuclear holocaust and environmental decay, the apocalyptic language of early Friends takes on fresh meaning.

The Imminence of God’s Order

Friends’ apocalyptic views were not of the type that predicted the end of the world on such and such a day. Neither did they encourage Friends to sit quietly waiting for the rapture or to take up arms in a struggle to compel the kingdom into existence. Rather, Friends lived with a sense of the imminent in-breaking of God’s order. They experienced God’s power transforming their own personal lives. They believed that this transforming power was also at work in the larger social, political and economic orders. The old, unjust, ungodly structures were facing God’s judgment and, found wanting, would soon be swept away. God’s order was coming to birth. The Day of the Lord was at hand.

Friends felt that their communities were already participating in this new order. They worshipped in a different manner. They dressed differently from those around them. They spoke differently. They bought and sold their goods in a different way. Every area of life was transformed.

These different patterns of life became known as religious testimonies. In later generations both Friends and non-Friends saw the testimonies as outward marks of a “peculiar people,” a community separated from the world. But in the first generation the testimonies were much more than this.

The Testimony of Worship

A few examples will make the role of the testimonies clear. Friends’ belief that Christ had come and was inaugurating God’s order revolutionized their mode of worship. The Quakers’ silent, or unprogrammed, worship no doubt seemed odd to many people around them, even as it does to many today, because it eschewed the usual forms of the worship service: sermons, Bible readings, hymns, responsive readings and outward celebration of the sacraments, or ordinances. But Friends understood this silence as an opportunity for inward listening to Christ. Christ had come to teach his people himself, they said. Christ would lead them in speaking and praying. Planned sermons and prayers were not necessary and could even get in the way of immediate listening to Christ.

Friends did not celebrate an outward communion. They understood that Jesus had asked his disciples to celebrate communion in remembrance of him, till he had come again. But Christ was come, Friends believed. There was no need to have a special celebration to remember One who was already present. Friends’ mode of worship reflected their belief that they were living in God’s new order.

Testimonies Against Class

Through the active process of listening to the Living Christ, Friends felt called into new relationships with other people as well. Seventeenth century England was a highly class-conscious society. Friends were particularly concerned about the spiritual consequences that arose out of the pride and arrogance engendered by this social system (at least for those on top of the hierarchical pyramid). In the eyes of Friends, such people usurped the authority which can rest only with God. Therefore, Friends refused to participate in the existing social structure. They felt called to a new way of living whose patterns were expressed in such testimonies as plain dress, plain speech and set prices.

Wealthy aristocrats in the 17th century donned elaborate attire: lace cuffs and collars, fancy hats and so on. Friends, in response, wore very simple clothing (which in later generations was standardized and called plain dress). They refused to greet others by removing their hats and bowing. Indeed, this refusal was one way newly converted Quakers could be

detected as such by old acquaintances. Friends even kept their hats on in meeting for worship, removing them only before the Lord—that is, in prayer.

Testimonies of Speech and Commerce

Speech also became a way of reflecting an alternative set of values. Seventeenth century English, like most European languages today, used two forms of address. The second person plural pronouns “ye” and “you” were used both to address more than one person and to give honor to any social superior. The second person singular “thou” and “thee” were used to address one person, a close family member (such as a brother or sister) or a social inferior. Friends refused to use “ye” and “you” as forms of social honor (although they did continue to use them as plural forms of address). Instead, they addressed all individuals alike with “thou” and “thee.”

This “plain speech,” as it came to be called, was a prophetic critique of the arrogant airs assumed by those in power. The testimony often brought forth great anger from those who felt slighted by its use. To say “thee” or “thy” to a magistrate might result in imprisonment. But Friends persevered. Their speech was another witness to the fact that they lived in God’s order, where all people were recognized as sisters and brothers.

Friends’ testimony on the buying and selling of goods became another sign of Christ’s transforming work. In the 1600s, bargaining between buyer and seller was common. But Friends insisted on setting a fair price and refused to bargain. The practice of bargaining, they said, was a way for buyer and seller to try to take advantage of one another, each wanting to receive the best price at the expense of the other. Living in God’s new order transformed the patterns of economic life.

The Lamb's War

These testimonies were manifestations of personal faithfulness to kingdom values, But they were also spiritual weapons in the struggle between God's order and the world's order. Using an image from the Book of Revelation, Friends called the struggle "The Lamb's War." The phrase referred to the war between Christ, the Lamb, and the forces of evil, unfaithfulness and destruction. This struggle takes place within each of us as we are called to surrender to Christ. But it also extends beyond our personal lives. Christ is struggling with unjust social, economic and political orders. Indeed, the whole cosmos is struggling to be reborn. As followers of Christ, we are called to enter this struggle on the side of the Lamb.

The startling juxtaposition of the images of war and lamb point to the paradox of Christ's redemptive work. The Lamb is engaged in a very strange kind of war and uses very strange weapons. Christ gives up the use of carnal weapons, such as the sword and the gun. The weapons of the Lamb are sacrificial love, servanthood, mercy, justice and the call to righteousness. As followers of Christ, these are the weapons we must use.

Through their speech, dress and business practices, Friends saw themselves as taking part in spiritual warfare. By these testimonies they were challenging the unrighteous structures and attitudes of the society around them. Friends hoped that the witness in their lives, speech and apparel would answer the witness which they were sure was already being spoken through the Word, Christ, in the hearts of those around them.

Thus these testimonies were not simply signs that Friends were a peculiar people who had decided to be a separated community through adherence to a series of minor scruples. Together these testimonies overturned patterns of behavior in virtually every basic area of human life. They expressed Friends' commitment to live faithfully in God's order, and, at the same time, they were the methods used to challenge the existing order and call it to righteousness.

New Dimensions for Quakers Today

Understanding the apocalyptic framework of early Friends has opened new dimensions of contemporary Quaker experience. We see more clearly that our present world must choose between life and death, God and unfaithfulness. The Day of the Lord is at hand for us. As followers of Christ we must see how Christ is calling us to live in God's order. What patterns of our lives must be changed?

This apocalyptic view has also made us realize that we had seen our faith in unintegrated bits and pieces, rather than as a whole. For example, it is no longer possible to define the very important emphasis Quakers have put on silent listening to Christ as devoting attention to the inward spiritual life alone. The inward dimension is clearly present and very significant. But listening to Christ is also the way in which the church is able to discern the patterns of living which give shape to community life and become its prophetic witness in the world. Listening in worship is a testimony to Christ's presence leading His people.

The apocalyptic experience has reshaped the way we understand community life as well. Friends have tended to see the plain dress and plain speech of classical Quaker communities as having little relevance to any larger witness in the world. Now we see that the very pattern of community life was not only relevant but in itself the means of carrying on the Lamb's War. Consequently, to build patterns of faithful, disciplined church-community is not to opt out of active witness in the world. Rather, it is a primary way in which the church may witness. The heart of the church's testimony is its prophetic participation in God's order.

Limits to Imitating the Past

The recent historical insights have also made it clearer to us that it is not possible to participate in God's order simply by imitating the patterns of church life in the past. When society changes we need to discern God's will afresh.

For example, the English language no longer uses two forms of address, "ye" and "thou." It uses "you" as the form of address to all persons. Thus, the language as a whole has adopted the opposite pattern from the Quaker one (that is, the use of "thou"). Therefore, Friends need to reflect again to see if God wishes them to continue their use of "thee" and "thy."

Many Friends have decided that they are not called to continue using this part of traditional plain speech. Some Friends continue to use "thee" and "thy" in everyday speech. They believe that the Quaker solution to the status problem in English grammar is the better one and that God calls them to use it today. This is not the place to comment on the decisions of various groups of Friends. The point is simply that imitation of the past, by itself, is not an adequate guide for faithfulness. Rather, it is necessary to listen to God's call in our lives today. How is God's order to be expressed now? What witness is required of us? This does not mean that kingdom values are relative. It only means that they must be expressed in ways that relate them to a particular time and place.

Implications for Social Activism

The apocalyptic stance provides strong support for active witness in the world. On the other hand, it also brings powerful challenges to the kind of social activism which has become the measure of much contemporary religious life. Early Friends understood that God is bringing the kingdom to birth. We are not only witnesses to that birth, but midwives for others, as they may be for us.

This is radically different from the implicit understanding which lies behind a good deal of our recent efforts at social change. We act as though the coming of God's order depended on us. *If* we can get Congress, the President, the Soviet Union, the local town council or the church to do this, then we will have a more peaceful, just and merciful world. Sometimes we give the impression that nothing will happen unless we make it happen. This attitude is a subtle form of idolatry and disbelief in God. It leads to enormous levels of frustration and to burnout, as we realize that our efforts are not capable of producing the kingdom.

But the early Friends did not work on an If-Then basis. (If we do this, then God's order will come.) They worked *because* the seed of the kingdom had taken root in their lives. *Therefore*, they lived in a new way. Every area of living reflected their participation in the birth of God's order. Their witness did not depend on their own strength to keep up campaigns, programs and projects, although many fine projects emerged out of this new life. The root of their witness was in God's

strength. Its first expression was in the transformed pattern of daily life, not in a campaign of social change. This new pattern of living itself became a profound witness to the larger world.

Community Life *and* Social Involvement

The apocalyptic hope allowed Friends to be engaged in the world but not be of the world. It allowed them to develop their faithful community life and still be actively involved in the needs of the larger society. So often in our later history, Friends acted as though we had to make a choice in arenas of faithfulness. We could retain God's patterns in our own communities or we could be active in the world. But we believed we could not do both without compromise on one side or the other.

For early Friends these were not two choices but two sides of the same witness. The apocalyptic hope helps us reclaim a more balanced vision of the church, in place of our partial and one-sided views.

Friends have been searching for a usable past to help us be faithful in the present. The vision God has given us at this moment in our history is not at all what we expected. It does not comfortably support all our existing views of Quaker life. Instead, this vision has had a radical effect. It has overturned many of our views of tradition, but it has also allowed us to reclaim a deeper understanding of our past. It has given us a perspective by which to evaluate contemporary religious practices.

We have been called back to our root, Christ. We find ourselves led not to imitate any particular cultural pattern which emerges from the past, but to listen again to Christ, who is calling us to enter God's kingdom. This kingdom is coming to birth in our midst right now. We pray that we may be enabled to listen and respond faithfully to Christ's call day by day.

Note:

1. More information about the apocalyptic experience of early Friends can be found in Douglas Gwyn's book *The Apocalypse of the Word: The Life and Message of George Fox (1624-1691)*, Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Meeting Press, 1986.