



# A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Twenty-Eight

Seventh Month, 1983

Dear Friend,

This month has produced some sad news, in the deaths of two very distinguished Friends. Herbert Nicholson, of Pasadena California, passed away early in Sixth Month. He was, report family members, active almost to the last day, visiting other elderly residents of nursing homes in a ministry he had carried on for many years. His work on behalf of Japanese-American internees in World War Two was described in Issue #22, where we named him Quaker of the Year for 1982. At the end of the month came news of the passing of Olcott Sanders, editor of *Friends Journal*, after a lengthy struggle with cancer. We have written before of our admiration for his work at the magazine, as well as his valiant spirit in the face of his illness. Both these Friends provide examples of a "whole life preaching" as George Fox charged Friends to do so long ago. They will be missed, and remembered.

These two men also, coincidentally, exemplify the subject of this issue, which is the variety of theological perspectives among unprogrammed Friends: Sanders was a Friends General Conference stalwart, while Nicholson, though of Philadelphia origins, had been evangelical in his outlook and part of a Conservative Meeting in Pasadena. It was at Friends General Conference earlier this month, that one evening interest group featured a panel representing three distinct religious outlooks current among unprogrammed Quakers. When the panelists had finished, one of the first comments from the floor was that three presentations were by no means enough to cover the range of active Quaker views.

I was struck by that comment, and as the discussion went on began making a list of the distinguishable theological perspectives I had come across. This list has continued to grow with later reflection, and now includes a baker's dozen of distinct outlooks, and it may have missed some at that. This issue, because of space limitations, will focus on eight trends discernible among unprogrammed Friends; a future issue will tackle the variety among programmed meetings and churches.

Since my intention here is description rather than debate, the approaches are sketched with as much dispassion as I could muster, but with no pretense of objectivity. One problem that has dogged me while compiling the list is the matter of finding a conceptual framework in which to organize it. So far, the theological diversity among Friends today defies efforts at classification--mine, anyway. Perhaps the best image to surface so far is that of the title: a patchwork, with pieces of varying fabric and design stitched together without an easily understandable pattern. Another image I like is that of a bed of wildflowers, responding to the same sun and rain with differing leaf patterns and, of course, a wide range of fruit. But let me not wax too poetic here; I will appreciate reader comment on this impressionistic survey.

Yours in the Light,

*Chuck Fager*

Chuck Fager



*\*Ethical Mysticism: The "Jonesists".* We begin with this view because for most of this century it represented the mainstream of unprogrammed Quakerism; it was as close to an orthodoxy as we got. Associated with Rufus Jones, its great exponent, it is now perhaps best exemplified in the ongoing work of John Yungblut. It sees Quakerism as a variety of mystical religion, but one in which the experience of union with God in silent worship produces active work for good in the world. Its classic expression is Thomas Kelly's *A Testament of Devotion*. More recently, in Yungblut's work, it has been much influenced by depth psychology, especially Jungian psychology, with its emphasis on myths and symbols generated by the human subconscious as the major vehicle of religious experience.

The centrality of Jonesist ethical mysticism to unprogrammed Quakerism is further shown by the fact that the next two approaches represent reactions to it: one carrying it, perhaps, to its logical conclusion, the other rejecting it as an erosion of truth.

*\*Universalist Quakerism: The "Lintonians".* Named for a British Friend, John Linton, who has been their principal spokesman and organizer, Universalist Quakers see the future of the Society as flowing from the premise that there are aspects of Truth in many, perhaps all, major religions. They call on Friends to affirm and seek out this Truth, and would detach the Society from any exclusive identity with any one of them, in particular with Christianity. Lintonians assert that the seeds of their viewpoint can be found in the work of the First Publishers of Truth, including Fox himself.

*\*The New Foundation: "Bensonites".* By contrast, the New Foundation Movement insists that a return to the Christianity of the early Friends, especially Fox, is necessary for a vital Society. The movement is built on the work of Lewis Benson, probably the major living student of Fox's writings, who has spent many years calling for the recreation of what he considers the authentic "Catholic Quakerism," in sharp distinction both to the Universalists and to Jonesist ethical mysticism. Bensonites are active proselytizers, travelling and publishing widely, seeking converts from all branches of Friends.

#### *Two Other Varieties of Christian Quakerism*

*\*Conservative Quakerism: "Wilburites".* The three small Conservative Yearly Meetings, in Iowa, Ohio and North Carolina, represent a much older strain of Christian Quakerism, one which predates Jonesism and its challengers by many decades and which, despite dwindling numbers, continues to offer inspiration to other groups. While their sobriquet is drawn from John Wilbur, whose resistance to the pastoral system and revivalism among Orthodox Friends in the 19th century gave them their identity, they are also the inheritors of Quietism, the era of John Woolman. Theirs is a Quakerism which emphasized plain speech, dress, livelihoods and worship, all built on a firm Christian orthodoxy. Conservative Quakerism has had a tough time adjusting to the changes of the 20th century; but at its best, in the work of Friends like Wilmer Cooper at the Earlham School of Religion, and William Taber at Pendle Hill, it has made major contributions to the Society at large.

*\*Ecumenical Christians: "Inclusivists".* This is the strain in which I locate myself, a constituency which takes the Christian roots of the early Friends very seriously, but does not see it as a warrant for the exclusion of other outlooks from among us. Thus we tend to be strong on Bible study while liberal on most lifestyle issues; but we have a hard time with such issues as just where the limits of our inclusiveness ought to be, and the relation of our Quaker Christianity to other major religions.

*\*Agnostics and Atheists: the "Methodonians".* The man who introduced me to the Society of Friends, the late Morris Mitchell, founder of Friends World College, was a devoted and distinguished Quaker. His life preached, as it was supposed to. But Morris Mitchell, as he explained to me later, was also an atheist. I have heard of other atheists among us, and not a few who would call themselves agnostics. What do such people find in a Religious Society such as ours? It is risky to generalize, but I suspect there are several things: one is a set of testimonies with which they unite: Morris Mitchell, a World War One combat veteran, was passionately for peace; then, Quakerism offers a method of



spiritual discipline, of worship, business and witness which, doctrine aside, they feel is rewarding in itself; and they find in their meetings a supportive, non-dogmatic community. Thus it is no surprise to hear that some, like Morris Mitchell, are in many ways exemplary Friends, and pillars of their groups. And it seems to me that the best answer to the question I have often heard about them, namely, "But *why* would an atheist want to be a Quaker?" is found by turning the question on its head: Don't these Friends provide the evidence that Quakerism is such a rich spiritual resource that one doesn't even have to be a theist to see great value in it?

*\*Pagans, Aquarians and New Age Quakers: The "PANists".* By pagan is meant a pre-Christian religious outlook which seeks transcendent meaning in natural phenomena and cycles. Chief among these are some feminist Friends who find the patriarchal character of Christianity offensive and have sought an alternative in earlier religions. One surviving form of pagan religion is what is now commonly called witchcraft, and this form has also been explored by some of these Friends. This feminist sentiment is often expressed in the pages of an occasional journal called *The Friendly Woman*.

### *Second Comings, Old and New*

Aquarians and New Ageists, on the other hand, make up a broader group, shaped by the counterculture of the sixties; they are particularly prevalent in some of the West Coast unaffiliated Yearly Meetings, but are also found elsewhere. Astrology, reincarnation, the I Ching, and anything with the word Wholistic prefixed to it are among the host of notions and practices which are widely dabbled in, if not staunchly affirmed.

For some, exploring these newfound modes of awareness is enough; for others, these means have disclosed the imminent emergence of a whole new kind of civilization, with a new human consciousness and new ways of life emerging with it. This is the New Age. To a traditional Christian, this notion has obvious parallels with the apocalyptic expectations of the Second Coming widely held among some evangelical groups. But by and large, PANist Quakers find the Christian orientation of other Quaker groups to be irrelevant or oppressive. Some have shown interest, however, in one or more of the numerous occult interpretations of Jesus's career and message which are abroad in such circles.

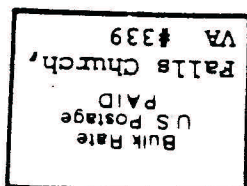
*\*Twelve Steps Quakers: The "Billites".* Only recently have I become aware, from reliable sources, that groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous have become a significant source of Quaker recruits. This fact is due, not to any excess of alcoholics among us, but rather to the character of these organizations, which is essentially religious but non-dogmatic, highly decentralized and strongly supportive of its members. The "theology" of such groups is summarized in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, as formulated by its founder, Bill W.

For a growing number of people whose lives have been redirected through this approach, a Friends meeting offers a congenial and reinforcing setting. Because of the nature of Alcoholics Anonymous and other Twelve Steps groups, however, these Billites will likely remain largely unidentified among us. That desire is understandable; yet in a way it is too bad, because the affinity of Quakerism and these other groups seems very much worth learning more about.

### *In Conclusion: Conclusions Are Illusions*

This survey is unavoidably superficial, and intentionally avoids the question of what all this variety in Quaker theology *means*. To some, it is a scandal, a sure sign of apostasy; to others, it is endlessly fascinating and enjoyable. I tend to oscillate between the two in my responses. My hope is that this summary might serve as a handy guide, and can be useful in efforts to make sense of unprogrammed Quakerism, and in beginning to sift the wheat from the chaff within it.

INSIDE: THE CRAZY QUILT OF  
CURRENT QUAKER THEOLOGY



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### THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

With a women's peace camp in progress near Seneca Falls, New York, it may be worth recalling a few details about the place of that small town in the annals of the Quaker witness for equality of the sexes. In Sixth Month 1848, five women met in a house there and planned the first women's rights convention. Three of the five were Friends, including Lucretia Mott, who was chosen to be the gathering's featured speaker. The five also drafted a resolution to sum up their demands, and hit on the idea of rewriting the Declaration of Independence. The resolution read, in part, "*We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal....The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her....*" It is no wonder that, once the convention was successfully held, on Seventh Month 19 and 20, there was a storm of unfavorable editorials in newspapers all over the country. The *New York Herald* denounced Lucretia Mott, saying she was full of "old maidish crochets and socialist violations of Christian dignity."

The story of the convention and the long career of Lucretia Mott as a Friend and an advocate of women's rights is well told in Margaret Bacon's book *Valiant Friend*, from which most of this material is taken.

### QUAKER CHUCKLE

#### *The Perils of Pauline*

When challenged by a critic of woman's rights, Lucretia Mott's answers were sometimes sharp. When asked once about the Apostle Paul's directive that women should obey their husbands, who were to be the heads of families, she replied that "Many of the opposers of Woman's Rights who bid us obey the bachelor Saint Paul, themselves reject his counsel. He advised them not to marry."

#### *A View From the Bridge*

Awhile back a Washington tourist was standing near the Lincoln Memorial when another visitor to the city pointed out toward the broad Potomac River and said, "Look, I can see a Quaker swimming in the Potomac!" (This was, of course, back when the river was swimmable.) The first tourist squinted at the speck in the water and asked, "How can you tell it's a Quaker from here?" "Oh, that's easy," came the reply, "she's swimming upstream!"

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