

A Friendly Letter

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Dear Friend,

I don't know if it counts as hitting the big time or not, but this journal last month garnered its first honest-to-goodness review. It was in *CoEvolution Quarterly*, published by the *Whole Earth Catalog* people. It described this writer as having "like many newsletter editors...a strong, opinionated personality" (*I can't imagine where he got that idea*) "which in this case makes for a highly readable publication." It added that "*A Friendly Letter* appears well balanced between confronting controversial subjects that often polarize Quakers and making a sincere effort to bring together 'the scattered outposts of Quakerdom.'" I could hardly have said it better myself....

Not so pleasing was another recent notice, from a reader interested in my quotation (in Issue #38) from the late Marshall Hodgson's essay, "The Peace Testimony: Christ Is The Root," reprinted by the Tract Assn. Of Friends. This reader wrote them for a copy, but was told it is out of print. But this very fine essay should not be unavailable to concerned Friends. Hence, I will send xerox copies to anyone who sends a SASE.

This continuing dialogue on the necessity and definition of a Christian identity for Quakerism is becoming something of a theme here, and this month there is yet another comment to share. It was made by Eric Kristensen of New England YM, during a session on "Religious Pluralism Among Friends United Meeting Friends," at the just-concluded FUM Triennial in California. Kristensen said that while he considered himself a Christian, he was often reluctant to use the term in conversation, unless those with whom he was speaking understood the sense of irony that went with it. What makes the term ironic, he explained later, is a keen awareness that Christ's name has not only been the means of salvation for many people through the centuries; but it has also been the excuse for terrible injustice, persecutions and wars. I would add to irony the importance of a sense of humility in making claims for the name, even as Friends convinced of its centrality for them bear faithful witness to their conviction.

This dialogue seems to me to be one of the most important processes now underway among Friends; so it may well resurface here. As it goes forward, I appreciate your responses and contributions, as always.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

The Society of Friends in the United States is "in very good shape," says John Punshon. But who is he and why should his opinion be of interest?

Friend Punshon is Tutor in Quaker Studies at Woodbrooke College, London Yearly Meeting's counterpart to Pendle Hill, in Birmingham, England. His *Portrait In Grey*, a study of Quaker history, has just been published by Friends Home Service in London. He recently finished a term as visiting professor at the Earlham School of Religion, and has since been criss-crossing the continent, a process that will continue until late next month when he returns to England. We caught up with him during the Friends United Meeting Triennial in California earlier this month, and persuaded him to sit for an interview on his impressions of the state of American Quakerism as he has seen it on this trip.

This is not Punshon's first trip to America, nor does he expect it to be his last. He said he makes such visits as part of an effort to stay in touch with the broad-range of Quakerism which it is his job to interpret, and which his own London YM, with its unprogrammed meetings and mostly homogeneous British culture, does not represent. "I come to America to get recharged, and to taste the flavor of things," he said.

A Potpourri of American Quaker Flavors

Punshon has been getting a taste of American Quakerism, all right: besides his time at ESR, he has visited several YMs, Friends General Conference and Friends United Meeting, as well as a number of individual meetings and churches. He has given numerous lectures, led discussion groups, talked with and listened to many individual Friends. This intensive immersion gives his impressions a rare breadth. Yet while he is free with his opinions, he also brackets them with a caveat: "I have to make judgments to make sense, but I recognize that my grasp on all this is to some extent superficial." These comments also deal more with the unprogrammed side of the Society, because that's mostly what he had seen at the time of our conversation. Here are samples of his observations:

"The Friends General Conference Gathering (held at St. Lawrence University, Canton NY 6/30-7/7) was much less diverse and chaotic than I thought it would be. I had been led to believe that FGC was all individualists; but I found a much greater sense of cohesion and community in the group than I expected." This cohesion, though, was more one of atmosphere than of religious outlook; as far as theology goes he did find plenty of variety. "Many people emphasized the spiritual importance of the Gathering to them," he observed. But that importance, Punshon felt, seemed to take the form of connecting with tradition, and as a social gathering rather than as a means of corporate threshing of faith issues.

"What" Questions Versus "How" Questions

The fact that faith issues were not being threshed out at FGC did not surprise or much disturb him. "In a diverse community you may not be able to get a common statement of faith. And what does this mean? It means either there's no unity in the group, which was obviously not true at FGC, since people there were getting along fine; or it means, as most Friends have long believed, that creeds aren't much good, except perhaps to exclude people." Or put another way, "The attempt to formulate religious experience can do violence to that experience."

He also noted that "The society today often sees itself as torn between Christianity and Universalism, and there's much to be said on both sides. Both points of view can claim sources among early Friends." Yet he observed that not many people have come to him wanting to explore these issues, which he calls the "What questions" of religious belief: "What are we--Christian or Universalist?" Instead, Punshon finds Friends asking the "How questions": How do we develop and sustain a religious life? "Keeping journals, prayer, the conduct and meaning of silent worship; I'm asked about these far more than I am the What questions."

One other phenomenon he stumbled on unexpectedly at FGC was the presence of a significant number of unprogrammed Friends with seminary training; he even took part in a

special interest group for such persons, which was well-attended. Most who came, he found, had not studied at ESR, and their presence, Punshon believes, poses a challenge for unprogrammed yearly meetings, where formal religious training does not translate into job prospects: "How are you going to use these people and their training without undermining your unprogrammed structure?" he wondered. "This is not a doctrinal problem as much as one of mood and structure. Can unprogrammed groups find a place for them without creating an elite?"

Punshon found this question popping up again at Earlham: "I was surprised at the large number of Friends from the silent tradition who were at ESR; I had expected to find that the students would all be pastors." He is convinced their numbers carries a message for unprogrammed groups, namely "That younger Friends want the challenge of disciplined thinking, and that the kind of religion primarily concerned with self-expression and personal experience is not sufficient anymore." But again, he wonders how the talents being developed at ESR will be absorbed by the unprogrammed structures.

Punshon praised ESR as "an absolutely Friendly place, a Quaker institution in the finest sense." But he is concerned about whether it can maintain a balance between programmed and unprogrammed Friends, and in particular whether it can draw more students from west of the Mississippi.

Western Quakerism, The Solvent of Stereotypes

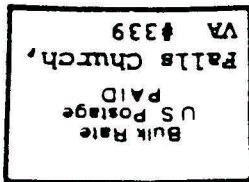
Travelling west of the Mississippi himself, Punshon found more preconceived notions being shaken up. Of Pacific Yearly Meeting, he admitted that his image was that "in California everything was at the extremes," hinting that he expected this rather liberal, unaffiliated group to look like something out of a 1960s counterculture scrapbook.

Not so: "Instead, I found it to be a very spiritual, serious-minded group of people," exploring ways to improve and deepen religious education in their far-flung meetings, and forming a committee to study the possibility of joining FGC, FUM or both. He lectured on the topic, "The Future of Friends by a Quaker Historian"; and when an informal discussion was scheduled to talk about the topic further, more than 100 Friends showed up. Again, he had thought such a session would settle on "What questions," the issues of faith; but no, once more the focus was on matters like worship, business procedure, silence as a spiritual resource--the familiar "How questions." Punshon feels the atmosphere at PYM presages a time of renewal and expansion there.

Coming Out of a Time of Transitions

These repeated experiences of finding more spiritual depth among liberal Quaker constituencies than he expected confirmed for Punshon his sense of where the Society is headed. He believes, in sum, that we are making a double transition: at one level, from a period in which race, sex and other issues of liberation and justice were at the forefront, to one in which they are seen more in context, and it is even possible to speak critically of particulars without being considered disloyal to the concerns which brought them forth. "There's no going back on these issues," he affirmed, "and their expression has qualitatively altered life to the good for everybody." But the atmosphere has changed, and these issues are now less emotionally charged. The other transition he perceives is a religious one. "We've been going through a religious trough in England, by which I mean that religion has not seemed to many to be a sufficient basis for their lives. But now that's changing, both generally and for the Society of Friends. These sort of things have happened before, and are like a pendulum swinging." He hopes the pendulum won't swing too far toward the kind of religiosity embodied by the Moral Majority. "But I think that's part of our ministry as Friends--to help see it doesn't go that far."

Is this a ministry Friends are ready for? John Punshon thinks so. He believes the Society, both in England and America, is growing in understanding, commitment and seriousness, even amid our occasionally-bewildering diversity. "There is a Quaker tradition that is strong enough to survive, and is surviving," he insisted, "without having to be dug up every so often and put into a statement." He stuck to this estimate even while he admitted that the slow growth or decline in numbers in many areas is a real problem. "We should be worried about growth, but real growth is contingent upon message. We're now getting some things about our message more clear, as a basis for real growth."



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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

On 7/31/1826, the notorious Spanish Inquisition conducted what is said to have been its last execution of a "heretic." The victim, a man named Cayetano Ripoll, who was a schoolteacher. Ripoll was also a Quaker, according to information recently published in *The Friend* of London. (See 5/25/84, p. 662.) Ripoll apparently came across Quaker ideas while a prisoner in France during the Napoleonic wars. He was arrested by order of the Junta of the Holy Office in 1824 after a pious woman denounced him for not taking his pupils to Mass. At his trial he was charged with teaching his scholars only the Ten Commandments, rather than the elaborate Catholic catechism. Members of the Tribunal de la Fe pleaded with Ripoll to renounce his Quaker "heresy," but he was steadfast. On the scaffold, with the rope around his neck, he told those present that "I die in peace with God and all men."

Two hundred years before Ripoll's arrest, in this month 1624, George Fox was born, in the little hamlet of Drayton-in-the-Clay, in England. And on 7/30/1718, one of the early Quaker movement's most eloquent champions of religious freedom and toleration, William Penn, died in Ruscombe, England.

QUAKER CHUCKLES

It's a Dog's Life

A very proper Quaker minister once noticed a crowd of scruffy boys clustered around a dog of doubtful pedigree. "What is thee doing, my boy?" he asked the nearest youth.

"We're swappin' lies," came the reply. "The feller that tells the biggest one gets to keep the dog."

"Why that's shocking," exclaimed the minister. "When I was thy age, I never thought of telling an untruth."

"You win, mister!" chorused the boys. "The dog's all yours."

A Blow for the Lord

A meeting was raising funds for a new meetinghouse, and the clerk was calling on members for pledges. One weighty and affluent Friend rose and said, "I'll subscribe five dollars." Just then a piece of old plaster fell on his head. Half stunned, the weighty Friend mumbled, "I mean f-five hundred dollars." At that point a voice was raised in prayer from the back benches: "Oh Lord, hit him again."
