

A Friendly Letter

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Dear Friend,

Many letters have come in about Issue #68 on Nicaragua, for all of which I am grateful. Most either strongly **approved** of it and its perspective, or strongly **disapproved**. Unfortunately, I don't have space to excerpt them; but much the same sentiments can be found in the letters in *Mother Jones'* 2-3/87 issue, and in *Friends Journal* for 2/1/87. Both recently ran pieces expressing views somewhat like mine, and evoked a similarly polarized response. Reading all these letters confirms my sense that there is a real and serious discussion underway among those who oppose current U.S. policy in Central America about the proper alternatives to it. I hope Friends who feel strongly about this will join in it constructively.

Speaking of opposing U.S. policy on Nicaragua, I recently came across a remarkable Quaker statement on this topic from 60 years ago. It is cited on page four in our *Quaker History* section. It seems that the more things change....

Here are two thought-provoking statements of more recent vintage: The first is by Zablon Malenge, Secretary of the East African Section of the Friends World Committee for Consultation, in Nairobi, Kenya from a report on his visit to America in the Section's 6/86 newsletter. He tells of introducing a "Kenyan Quaker woman at the Kenyan Embassy in Washington DC" to unprogrammed worship, only to find that she "was deeply surprised and even disturbed by the Quaker diversity and said (she) was desirous of meeting and sharing with what she called 'the true Friends Meetings' which according to her are the programmed meetings. 'Are these quiet people Friends? Why are they silent in their meetings? I can't imagine a Quaker meeting without music,' she was too vocal to be convinced."

The other quote is from George Newkirk, in his *Clerk's Comments* to the Representative Meeting of Southeastern Yearly Meeting for 1/87. It describes an all-too-common pattern of decline in Friends meetings: "A member perceives a hurt--sometimes real, sometimes imaginary--but is denied an appropriate hearing. The hurt, or the complaint, or the issue, continues to grow, the conflict escalates. Finally, to avoid continued hurting of themselves or others, the trend starts: there is a move from the facing to the back benches; from active to passive participation; from substantial to subsistence support; from frequent to occasional to non-attendance to complete withdrawal. With fewer to carry on, the burn-out rate increases....(The) practice of 'reading members out' has largely ceased; instead, we make conditions so uncomfortable or disagreeable or difficult that members have little choice but to leave--reluctantly but voluntarily."

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

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A FINE HARVEST OF QUAKER BOOKS

Although barely two months old, 1987 is turning out to be an exceptional year for Quaker books. Among these are several volumes which offer important reexaminations of Quaker history or present challenging critiques of social and religious views widespread among us. Here I want to focus on three new books which seem to me of particular value.

Let's turn to history first. Friends, especially newcomers, who want to understand how the Quaker landscape in America got to be as varied and often fractious as it is now have available a serious, scholarly examination of the episode that marks the first, fateful fork in the road, the Hicksite-Orthodox Separation of 1827. The book is H. Larry Ingle's *Quakers In Conflict*, published by the University of Tennessee Press. Ingle is a history professor at the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga, and a member of Chattanooga Meeting. The book is not only exciting reading; as Ingle points out, it is also the first account of the Separation based on a careful scholarly examination of the extensive original source materials that have sat gathering dust in Philadelphia Quaker libraries for over a century. Ingle's status as a pioneer in this field was a surprise to him, since much has been written about the Separation in standard Quaker histories. But these were largely based on secondary sources, he found; and asking why the original materials had been so long unexamined, he was told by one librarian that Philadelphia Friends of the past generations preferred not to stir old ashes, for fear of stoking new flames of controversy and division.

The Tragic Story No One Wanted To Tell

But as well-informed Friends know, there is no lack of religious controversy among us today; the ashes are stirred by many hands, the embers glow. And as Ingle's account shows, many of the same issues which divided Friends in 1827 are still with us; the reunification of the divided Yearly Meetings a generation ago has not resolved them. The major streams of Quakerism still show the marks of a struggle which Ingle believes "partook of the classic nature of tragedy." As he puts it, the Hicksites thought they were preserving ancient Quaker tradition, but this was soon largely jettisoned as the heirs to Hicks came to be those who see "the Society as...a refuge for those who want freedom to follow their own individual bent in an atmosphere that is mildly religious and fiercely tolerant." Yet their Orthodox opponents proved "woefully unable to maintain the most obvious Quaker features of the faith once they succumbed to the lures of evangelical theology....Today the majority of American Quakers go to churches," and are "all but indistinguishable from their Methodist and Baptist neighbors in many areas of faith and practice."

"This story is a sad one," Ingle affirms. But how are we to write a happier sequel without remembering and coming to terms with it? Thanks to Larry Ingle, in *Quakers In Conflict* we have the resource needed to deepen our understanding of this unhappy heritage.

George Fox: Mystic, Puritan--Or Prophet?

If such fruitful understanding of our past were to become more widespread, how should it affect our religious identity? Larry Ingle finds the spiritual descendants of both the Hicksites and the Orthodox inadequate as Quaker models. But is there a better alternative? Douglas Gwyn thinks so. Gwyn, a graduate of Union Theological seminary and Drew University, has been both a Friends pastor, at the Berkeley Friends Church in California, and a member of the firmly liberal, unprogrammed Brooklyn Meeting in New York. For him, the outline of a reconstructed Quakerism can be found in the work of its founder, George Fox. His book, *Apocalypse of the Word*, just out from Friends United Press, explains why.

Gwyn's book draws heavily on the work of the late Lewis Benson, a nonacademic student of Fox's work, who spent many years reading and correlating Fox's numerous and very unsystematic works. Benson's interpretation of Fox, presented in writings and speeches, became the nucleus of a reforming movement among Friends known as the New Foundation. With *Apocalypse of the Word*, the New Foundation has produced a major new theological statement by a writer with academic as well as religious credentials.

Gwyn sees current Quaker religious life as mainly shaped by two schools of thought, roughly corresponding to the Orthodox and Hicksite streams described by Larry Ingle. Most unprogrammed Friends follow a *mystical* approach based on the work of Rufus Jones; most programmed Friends see Quakerism as a species of *Protestantism*, a view he ascribes above all to historian Hugh Barbour. Gwyn sees grains of truth in both, but like Lewis Benson he also finds both essentially incomplete and unbalanced. For Gwyn, the essence of a complete Quaker vision is not mysticism or Protestantism but rather in a *prophetic Christianity*, growing out of Fox's oft-repeated declaration that "Christ has come to teach his people himself." Gwyn analyzes Fox's writings in detail, arguing that Fox saw this coming of Christ as real but inward; this, he preached, was the second coming of Christ spoken of in the gospels and particularly in the biblical Book of Revelation. For Fox, then, Christ's return is not some future event for which you can set a date, but a present reality in the hearts of his followers. Their life together under Christ's direction amounts to the presence on earth of the kingdom of God that Jesus spoke of so often; such followers are "the true church."

Is There Really a New Foundation?

Gwyn's thesis is provocative, and raises many questions: Is his understanding of Fox really that superior to the mysticism of Jones or the Protestantism of Barbour? Does the "prophetic Christianity" that he and the New Foundation offer as a model of Quakerism really offer the promise of overcoming the processes of assimilation noted by Larry Ingle as coming out of the Orthodox-Hicksite division? Can it produce a new, and newly vital Society of Friends superior to any that we now know? Gwyn cautions that the "fuller fruition of this movement remains to be seen," and admits that "it may become overwhelmed by the weight of its historical reference and prove to be simply an antiquarian interest group, harkening back to a Quaker Golden Age." But if the verdict on the "prophetic Christian" model of the New Foundation is not yet in, Gwyn makes a challenging case for it in *Apocalypse of the Word*, one that calls out to be carefully and seriously considered.

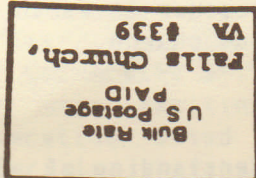
One more very challenging publication that Friends ought to read and carefully ponder is that by Jack Powelson in *Facing Social Revolution*, just published by Horizon Society Publications, 45 Bellevue Drive, Boulder CO 80302. Powelson is a Quaker economist who has worked on economic development projects in many poor countries, and has studied the processes of economic development for many years. While *Facing Social Revolution* presents the conclusions of this long experience, it is only secondarily a treatise on economics. At bottom, it is a *cri de coeur*; as he says, he wrote it "from a sense of compulsion, even duty, to set forth the tortuous path of intellectual and religious searching for the Truth which I have traveled as Quaker, pacifist, and economist. The path has been beset with doubts, confusion, error, hard work, and gratifying illuminations."

A Potent Challenge to Conventional Quaker Wisdom

This short book is for the most part simply written and easily understandable--all remarkable features in the work of a professional economist. But even more important is the message it sets out so concisely. Powelson calls radically into question the direction and assumptions of most liberal Friends today on such issues as how to promote justice and economic development in poor countries. In particular, he questions our general acceptance of the idea of government-centered action, usually of a socialist kind, as the way to advance human rights and social justice, and revolution, usually violent, as the most likely way to achieve such intervention. "Watch out for bandwagons," he warns. "When the whole society, or even much of the Society of Friends, suddenly veers in one direction, then especially is the time to ask: 'Is this correct?' Sometimes it is," he admits, "but more often it is not." Against the grain of most current liberal Quaker thought, he argues that empowering the poor is more surely achieved through "plural(ist) societies, decentralization of power, widespread ownership of wealth, compromise and conflict resolution rather than violence, and...the slow growth of institutions to moderate all these things. Not," he concludes, "that these institutions take precedence over economic justice, but that they are essential to it."

During the Vietnam years, such talk seemed utterly inadequate and irrelevant to me and many of my peers. Today most of it makes a great deal of sense. Does that mean I am now wiser, or merely older? Read *Facing social Revolution* and judge for yourself. This is an important book, which deserves a wide audience and thoughtful consideration among Friends.

INSIDE: THREE IMPORTANT NEW QUAKER BOOKS



From: Chuck Fager, A Friendly Letter
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THIS YEAR IN QUAKER HISTORY

We interrupt our regular sequence to bring you an item which merits looking at early: On 10/24/1927, what is now Friends United Meeting adopted this minute:

"The Five Years Meeting of Friends in America deplores the attitude and the methods which our Government has assumed in its dealings with Latin America, and especially do we protest against the policy of force which the Government is pursuing in Nicaragua, resulting in loss of human life and leading to deep and growing resentment throughout Latin America. We urge that a policy of patient and disinterested friendship should be substituted and that in our future relations with Nicaragua in the working out of its difficult problems we shall seek the aid and cooperation of neighboring Latin American states."

It seems that U.S. marines had invaded Nicaragua--again--in pursuit of the legendary rebel leader Sandino. The situation today seems close enough to 1927 that one wonders whether this minute could be renewed, changing only the name, without being any less apt. Does someone want to propose this to FUM?

QUAKER CHUCKLE

In the mid-1890s, the eminent Quaker historian Elbert Russell, then a student at Earlham College, visited Tennessee one summer vacation and decided to travel home to Indiana on a new-fangled machine called a bicycle. One evening he was riding along, "hoping to make the county seat before it got too dark. As I passed a rather large white house, someone yelled 'Hello, there.' I dismounted, pushed my wheel up to the gate where the man was standing, and said 'Good evening.' He looked me and the wheel over in speechless astonishment and explained his excitement. He was standing by the gate when he saw what looked like a cow coming up the road. Then he thought, 'If that's a cow, she's a comin' all-fired fast, and her feet ain't a makin' no noise." When he saw me gliding by without any sound of my steps and could not see the wheel, he thought sure it was a ghost. I...asked if he would take me in for the night. He seemed glad to do so. There were two beds in the big front room. The man and his wife occupied one and gave me the other. After we had got in bed and just as I was dropping off to sleep, the man said, 'Mister, if you hadn't stopped, I wouldn't a' slept none this night.'"

--from *Elbert Russell, Quaker*, by Elbert Russell
