

A Friendly Letter

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Fourth Month, 1987

Dear Friend,

Let me take this opportunity to welcome a new colleague, J. Stanley Banker, who is now phasing in as editor of *Quaker Life*. Banker is pastor of First Friends Meeting in New Castle, Indiana, near Indianapolis. First Friends is reliably reported to be a lively, diverse Quaker group, encompassing both unprogrammed and programmed worship, as well as both evangelical and liberal theological outlooks. This is a promising background from which to undertake the editorship of the magazine of Friends United Meeting, which has perhaps the widest potential range of readers of any of the three major Quaker Quaker periodicals, and which has been in great need of a broader editorial vision.

Banker will not actually take the reins until Seventh Month, so any changes in the magazine will not be immediate. Even so, we still look forward to seeing *Quaker Life* become a reliable and timely source of reporting on FUM news and issues, and a forum where honest, fair and Friendly dialogue on the many tough issues FUM is grappling with. *Quaker Life* could be a distinguished Quaker publication. FUM needs such a voice; nay, Friends at large need it. Here's hoping that Stan Banker is the Quaker to make it happen.

On another matter, not long ago subscriber Dennis Hartzell of Wheaton, Maryland wrote in to say that, while he liked this letter, "I hate those inserts!! They always fall out and I don't know what to do with them--they unfavorably remind me of the 10,000 or so subscription renewal cards you find in every magazine nowadays. Could you staple them in or print the information in the text of the letter?"

I want to be sensitive to this concern. But unfortunately, I can't staple them in, and there isn't enough space to print them in the text. Further, the letter very much needs the revenue that many of the inserts generate. (Some of them have been fundraising flyers for various Friendly projects, which have been inserted gratis, as a sign of support.) So at this point, I am afraid I don't see a way either to get rid of them or to change their format much, and can only ask Friend Hartzell and other like-minded readers to indulge me in what seems to be a necessity.

This matter takes on a new wrinkle this month, in that this issue contains an insert that is the first of its kind: a paid advertisement for Jack Powelson's book *Facing Social Revolution*. It's a book I am pleased to help publicize; and if there are other readers with something to advertise who think this letter might be a useful medium, write for details.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

QUAKERS, AMERICAN HISTORY, AND PUBLIC SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS

How would you briefly describe Quakerism to a non-Friend? Primitive Christianity revived? An expression of universalist religious mysticism? An alternative to both Catholic and Protestant spirituality? What about the following thumbnail descriptions:

- A. "A religious group."
- B. "A protestant sect often persecuted for its extreme views."
- C. A group which "could not get along with the English government. They would not give money to the English church. They also refused to fight in England's wars."
- D. "Quakers were a very tolerant religious group who did not believe in churches or ceremonies and would not fight for any reason. They dressed very plainly and called one another 'thee' and 'thou.'"

These "definitions" are from four American history textbooks widely used in public schools. The books are also among a group of books which were banned from use in Alabama public schools last month by a federal court. Judge W.B. Hand, in his order, "concluded that the challenged textbooks violate the establishment clause of the First Amendment," because they "discriminate against the very concept of religion, and theistic religions in particular," in favor of "the further advancement of the religion of secular humanism."

Looking For What You Can't Look Up

Should Friends be concerned about this decision, and the growing complaints about the treatment of religion by public school texts? With three children now in public schools myself, and a fourth soon to follow, my answer is emphatically affirmative. In order to begin sorting out the facts and the issues, I decided to check out both the decision and some of the textbooks involved. The Alabama case dealt with three kinds of texts: history, social studies, and home economics. All are interesting, but to keep this inquiry manageable, I stuck with the history texts, and looked at how often Quakers were mentioned and what was said about them. I was able to examine ten of the twelve history texts involved.

By numbers alone, Friends seem to be treated rather well. As small as we are, "Quakers" nonetheless had an average of 4.2 index references per book, compared with 6.6 for Jews, and 7.6 for Catholics--not bad considering that there are several hundred times more Catholics. We owe this visibility above all to a piece of plain dumb luck: the fact that Charles II owed William Penn's father money. In American history texts, there is simply nothing like having the founder of a state on your membership list--as the Mormons can also attest.

What The Numbers Tell--And What they Don't

But as the above "definitions" of Quakerism suggest, more than numbers is involved; quality as well as quantity is important. And here the picture is much less reassuring. Most authors go to great lengths to avoid saying anything about actual religious beliefs. For instance, here is one book's account of Penn's conviction: "one day, in 1667, at age 22, young Penn heard a sermon on the text, 'There is a faith that overcometh the world.' The sermon converted Penn. He became a member of the...Quakers." But just what this "overcoming faith" held, or even the source of the convicting "text", is not indicated.

This is typical. Another text notes that the British government "would have tolerated the Quakers...had the Quakers been a little less zealous. Because of their religious beliefs, the government looked upon the Quakers as a disloyal and rebellious group." But just which beliefs made them seem disloyal and rebellious, not to mention tiresomely zealous, the book does not say. Indeed, two books even managed to cover Penn and the founding of Pennsylvania without ever identifying his religious preference at all! (I suppose we should be grateful they don't bring up pictures on oatmeal boxes and granola bars.) The "best" definition of Quakerism I found was this: "The Quakers believed that God lived in the soul of every human being. They also taught that all people were equal and that no person should harm or kill another." And that is not very good.

In fairness, it must be noted that, if their religious basis is ignored, some Friends'

times, support of religious toleration and peace with the Indians thrice each. Further, occasionally a notable Friend other than Penn surfaces: one book tells of "John Woolman, a conscientious and thoughtful Quaker tailor, who journeyed through the colonies trying to persuade Quakers to free their slaves," adding that "his journal is still read and admired today." Another says of Herbert Hoover that, "as a Quaker, he believed that war was wicked," and describes in respectful detail his efforts to promote disarmament negotiations and nonintervention in central America.

We lose out, however, when the women's movement comes up: Lucretia Mott was included as a pioneer feminist in seven texts, but only two noted her Quakerism. This is consistent with the general pattern noted by several analysts of such texts, namely that while it may be all but impossible to avoid at least mentioning religion in the colonial era, the subject rapidly fades from view in the next century.

One important effect of the fadeout of religion by the time of the Civil War is to consign evangelical and fundamentalist churches to virtual invisibility in the texts. For instance, I found only two index references to evangelical churches in all ten books together, and none for fundamentalists. I did, however, discover a couple of unindexed mentions of the latter. One of these was a "definition" of fundamentalists as "people who follow the values or traditions of an earlier period." Evangelical churches fared better in the one book which defined them as "those that stressed salvation through faith in Christ, personal conversion, and knowledge of the Holy Scriptures." In its concreteness, this definition stuck out like a sore thumb amid the general fog of euphemisms and indirection.

A Conspiracy So Immense--?

Judge Hand noted that expert witnesses had testified that much of the neglect of religion was evidence of no more than bad writing, poor scholarship, and the notorious vulnerability of textbook publishers to pressure groups. However, he insisted that "These history books...are not merely bad history, but lack so many facts as to equal ideological promotion." Thus, they "give rise to a constitutional violation."

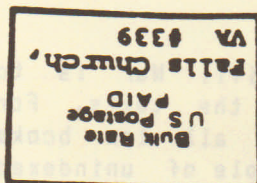
For my part, while the failings of these texts in chronicling the role of religion in American history are abundantly clear, it is by no means evident that this springs from, or promotes, some nefarious effort to spread a religion of "secular humanism." If there is any conspiracy revealed here, it is aimed at convincing students that reading history is intolerably dull. This is not a new scheme, however; I was a victim of it a generation ago.

Restoring the Reputation of truth, and of History too

But even if no secular humanist plot is thus unmasked, I feel considerable empathy with both the plaintiffs in this case, and the besieged textbook publishers. On the plaintiffs' side, it seems obvious that the views of many religious groups--including Friends, despite our relative overrepresentation--are simply not dealt with adequately in these texts. On the other hand, it is enormously difficult in our diverse society to produce a book which chronicles the religious history of America in a way that could be broadly acceptable to the thousands of autonomous local school boards which make the purchasing decisions; indeed, I wouldn't be surprised if it weren't, practically speaking, impossible. (Any Quaker who has worked on revising a book of Faith and Practice should know what I mean--imagine a drafting committee with ten thousand members!) Hence, while it makes for dismal texts, I can understand the publishers' desire to minimize controversy by minimizing mention of religion; that's less secular humanism than a patriotic American desire to stay in business.

I doubt that the Alabama decision will survive on appeal. But if it does no more than spark a rewrite of these texts' treatment of religion, that will almost certainly lead to their improvement. And interested Friends should take the opportunity to press for better portrayal of our beliefs. At the same time, we should not expect too much from any such process. Quakerism, despite its important contributions to American history, is definitely a non-mainstream sect, and we can expect to be continually misrepresented, or at least often misunderstood, in mainstream accounts. The primary responsibility for telling our story, both to the public and, most of all, to our children, is and will be nobody else's but ours.

INSIDE: IS QUAKERISM TREATED FAIRLY
IN PUBLIC SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS?



From: Chuck Fager, A Friendly Letter
P.O. Box 1361
Baileys Crossroads, VA 22041

THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

So has thee been enjoying hearing about the Jim Bakker televangelist sex scandal? Is thee confident such a thing would not happen among Friends?

Think again. In Fourth Month, 1875, two birthright Philadelphia Quakers, Robert Piersall Smith and his wife Hannah, were enroute to the Meeting for the Promotion of Scriptural Holiness in Brighton, England, a high point in the early holiness movement. Ten thousand evangelical leaders attended, and it left a lasting impact on their churches. And the star of the show was Robert Piersall Smith, an inspiring speaker who had just finished a triumphal tour of the Continent, preaching entire sanctification by a "second blessing" which he said made Christ the passionate bridegroom to the believer's demure maiden soul.

But the meeting had hardly adjourned when Smith was accused by the movement's leaders of taking his "bridal mysticism" entirely too literally while counseling young women, and one woman in particular. Indeed, he left Brighton in disgrace, and according to a recent account, thereafter "his spiritual decline was steady"; he "never again testified to spiritual peace and died a pathetic, defeated man."

QUAKER CHUCKLE

Speaking of questionable practices, Friend Philip Kirk of Oxford, Pennsylvania was at a recent session of Baltimore Yearly Meeting in which participants signified approbation of various actions by waving their fingers, rather than applauding. Afterwards he wrote a song, "Ode From the Balcony"; here are a few verses:

I went down to the business meeting, I sat in a chair up in the air.
From there what I saw, my mind it did appal--They waved their fingers in the air.

CHORUS:

Oh, what are they doin' down there? They wave their fingers in the air.
Tell me, what are they doin' down there? They wave their fingers in the air!

They talked about peace, love and hunger, The Richmond Declaration too;
They discussed the minutes for hours--Then they waved their fingers in the air!

Now I've been there many times before; I thought I'd seen enough to know the score.
I've seen 'em take a stand, I've seen 'em raise their hands--
But I never saw 'em wave 'em in the air.

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