

# A Friendly Letter

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Tenth Month, 1987

Dear Friend,

A Quaker timebomb is ticking away in Grand Rapids, Michigan, at the Eerdmans Publishing Co. It is a manuscript for a book, whose working title is **Peace and Revolution: the Moral Crisis of American Pacifism**. It is set to go off next spring, probably in Fourth Month.

The book is by by Guenter Lewy, a retired political scientist who taught for many years at the University of Massachusetts. The book examines the political evolution of four major peace groups during and after the Vietnam war. The longest chapter in Lewy's book is the Quaker timebomb: it deals with the American Friends Service Committee.

Lewy's politics are of a very conservative, Cold War variety, which I definitely don't share. But his scholarship is solid; and working from the AFSC's own archives, he raises very disturbing questions about its performance during Vietnam and afterward.

An earlier outside critique of AFSC, in a 1979 *New Republic* article, caused an uproar among Friends that lasted for months. I believe Lewy's book offers a more serious challenge than the 1979 article did, because Lewy is a serious scholar and Eerdmans a highly respected publisher. Thus I expect that the fallout from it will likely be more serious than in 1979.

When faced with such earlier critiques, the AFSC has tended to ignore or play them down, or make only a token response. I doubt whether such a strategy will work this time. Top AFSC staffers have been shown Lewy's manu-

script, and if they are wise they will set to work very soon to shore up their attenuated lifelines among Friends; AFSC will probably need them before this looming storm blows over.

Turning from such outward tempests to a more personal and internal one, I note that our last two issues have arrived later than usual. In Eighth Month, some postal glitch slowed it up; it even took over two weeks to get a copy three miles from the post office to my house. But last month's letter was delayed when an infection landed me in the hospital just as it was set to be mailed. This latest bout with illness hardly compares with the trauma described in AFL #64, and it seems to be behind me now. But it was disruptive nonetheless, for thee and me alike.

Finally, here is an item to file under **Friendly Signs Of the Times**: Joan Baez, whose new book was reviewed in AFL #77, was interviewed in the 11/5/87 20th anniversary issue of *Rolling Stone* Magazine. While explaining what keeps her going these days, she affirmed her Quakerism twice in two pages. By contrast, as a cover subject of *Christianity Today's* 9/18 issue, popular evangelical Quaker writer Richard Foster defended his theology for several pages against charges of "New Age"-ism, without mentioning Quakerism even once.

Yours in the Light,

*Chuck Fager*

Chuck Fager



It would be very easy to take potshots at the International Friends Conference on Evangelism. Too easy, in fact.

In case you haven't been following it, the International Friends Conference on Evangelism is about to get underway. It is sponsored by the Evangelical Friends Alliance, and most of the organizational work has been done from the Evangelical Friends Church-Eastern Region office in Ohio. The conference will run from 11/4 to 11/11, at a hotel in Guatemala City. About 260 Friends are registered, of which about half are coming from countries other than the U.S., mainly Latin America but also Africa and Asia. The gathering's theme is "Jesus Christ Is Lord", and its goal is to enhance the missionary efforts of the various national groups.

Given these objectives, the conference program is predictable: Large group worship twice a day featuring major addresses; workshops on various aspects of the evangelical Christian message, nuts-and-bolts sessions on preaching, how-tos on "church planting" and other forms of missionary work.

### *A List of Possible Complaints*

And as I say, the Conference is a very easy target for criticism, especially from a liberal Quaker perspective like mine. Here is an opening list of possible objections:

- \* Start with the fact that while billed as an international gathering, the planning and program committees are made up entirely of Americans.

- \* Then one could note that of twelve major addresses at the Conference, only one is to be delivered by a woman; moreover, there are few women on the program and selection committees. Furthermore, the main evening speaker for the week is a non-Friend.

- \* Notice also that the conference will gather in a region long torn by civil and international strife, yet one looks in vain for any mention of the phrase "Quaker Peace Testimony." For that matter the words "peace," "justice" and "human rights" are likewise found nowhere in the program.

- \* With no mention of Testimonies, Quaker process, or silent worship, one is bound to ask just how recognizably *Quaker* is the missionary work being nurtured here, as distinct from just another minor variety of generic evangelical empire building.

The list could be longer, but I will stop there. Already it's enough to enable a liberal Friend to dismiss or ignore the conference. It won't be dismissed or ignored here, but neither will this list of shortcomings be pressed very hard. That's not because these concerns have no merit, because they do. It is rather that when they come from a liberal Quaker vantage point, such complaints have serious credibility problems. Let me explain why by way of an example:

In late 1984, I visited the Quaker mission to the Mowa Indians in southern Alabama (see AFL #45). I liked the work being done there by Phil and Lee Herr, for the Associated Committee of Friends on Indian Affairs. Yet some of these same questions occurred to me then, not least the one about the specific Quaker character of the Mowa project. But on reflection, there were two main reasons why these concerns did not seem worth dwelling on in my report. They were:

### *The Advantage of Being There*

First, given the alternatives in the area--mainly exploitation by semiliterate holiness preachers, many of whom would make Jim and Tammy Bakker look honest by comparison--even the most evangelical kind of Quakerism, presented with integrity, was a great improvement. Secondly and most important, if the Herrs' theology differed from mine, well, they had one big advantage in any debate I might start: they were *there*, on the scene, doing the work; I wasn't.

These same considerations, especially the second, come to mind again when I ponder possible criticisms of the International Friends Conference on Evangelism. Certainly it exhibits the limitations of its sponsors' strain of Quakerism (yet to be fair, it shows some openness, too: Philadelphia YM's Sam Caldwell and the AFSC's Dan Seeger will be leading workshops on "Quaker distinctives"); but to me it has a commanding rebuttal to liberal critics in the simple fact we are *not* planning an International *Liberal* Friends Conference on Evangelism (though we would probably call it *Outreach*). Indeed, the very idea would probably precipitate a crisis in any liberal body where it was raised.

For the embarrassing truth is that we liberal American Friends *talk* a lot about universalist aspects of Quaker faith (and rightly so, I think); but most of the time we *act* as if it were mainly a family, or at best a neighborhood affair. To be sure, many of



us enjoy attending international Quaker conferences which bring together Friends of different nationalities and traditions. But we do so while evidently managing to ignore the fact that it is because some Friends have been dedicated to mission-ary evangelism that there are these other Friends to have international conferences with. (And for that matter, there are American Friends only because British Quakers once felt compelled to pursue "foreign" missions....)

When this topic has come up in liberal Quaker circles in my hearing, it hasn't been long before someone, usually an older, birth-right Friend says, "Yes, but remember, *'Friends do not proselytize.'*" This phrase is cited with clear quotation marks, as if taken from Holy Writ, straight out of the *Discipline*, George Fox or Paul. This despite the fact that after no little searching, I have not found it in any *Faith and Practice*, and it is certainly contrary to everything Fox (or Paul) ever did or said. Yet it is not only repeated, it hangs over most liberal Quaker bodies as a mostly unspoken but essentially unshakable principle of operation.

### ***Good Reasons For Doing Nothing?***

Why? Why this deeply-ingrained resistance to what the first generation of Friends took for granted? My suspicions are that one part of it goes back to the generation after Fox, the one which came to maturity just as the Society achieved the legal toleration it had struggled and suffered so long for. This was when, the historians say, the Society changed from a **movement** out to conquer the world into one **sect** among others. These Friends settled into Quietism, more devoted to guarding their children and upholding traditional testimonies--many of which were rapidly turning into peculiarities--than spreading the gospel of the Light of Christ.

There is much to respect and cherish about that era of Quakerism, and the dwindling band of Conservative Quakers who are its living monument. Its emphasis on respecting the invisible workings of the Spirit, and its doubts about the "creaturely" nature of organized missionary activity, as well as the tendency for Quaker identity to get lost in larger "cooperative efforts" deserve to be taken seriously. Unfortunately, the near-disappearance of Conservative groups undercuts the force of these concerns; if the Quietist way leads only to the cemetery, those who want Quakerism to survive may have to be forgiven some compromises.

Yet these Quietist scruples are not the whole story, it seems to me, but only the best part of it. Much of the rest of our reluctance comes down, I believe, to little more than a kind of elitism that is in part the "peculiar people" idea gone decadent and in part no more than parochial suburban snobbery. In this setting the oft-cited phrase might more accurately be restated thus: ***"The best sort of Quakers (namely ours) don't stoop to proselytize."***

Of course, we do "share our faith" one-to-one, and indeed many liberal yearly meetings are growing more rapidly than many evangelical meetings (see AFL#57 for data on this trend). But we are growing almost exclusively among people just like us; indeed, one of our favorite pasttimes is to bewail the homogeneous character of our meetings.

To bewail it, yes, but certainly not to do anything about it. Which is hardly surprising, because if actually tried to demonstrate the supposedly universal character of our faith by attempting to gather people to in a drastically different cultural background, we would be stepping willy-nilly into, good grief, ***missionary evangelism***. And we couldn't do that because, you see, "Friends don't proselytize."

### ***Glimmers of repentance?***

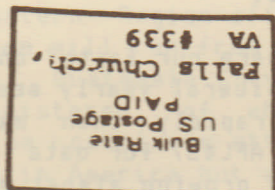
Needless to say, this mishmash of history and hypocrisy is embarrassing to me, as I think it should be to most thoughtful liberal Friends, especially the majority of us who are convinced. This is so not least because I believe that if we were ever to sit down and actually think about our kind of Quakerism as something we ought to share widely, we could develop our own approach to mission work. It would differ markedly from that of other groups no doubt, even while acknowledging our debt to their example. There are a few, a very few glimmers of such an approach: The concern of Janet Minshall of Atlanta Meeting to work with women in Kenya is one, and the project being developed by alumni of the World Gathering of Young Friends to put meetings on different continents in meaningful touch with each other is another.

But these are only glimmers. For the most part, American liberal Quakerism remains mired in its parochialism. And this leaves any liberal criticisms of the Evangelical conference in Guatemala, however theoretically sound, carrying little force against the sheer fact that they, at least, are there.



INSIDE: A CRITIQUE OF QUAKER MISSIONS--  
AND THE LACK OF QUAKER MISSIONS

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## THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

In late 1956, Virginia was involved in what was called "massive resistance" to school desegregation. Much of its effort was aimed at the NAACP, which had filed several suits against all-white schooling. In 8/1956 the legislature created a special investigative committee, which launched a state-sanctioned witchhunt, travelling around the state interrogating and intimidating as many integration supporters as it could find.

Nearly a hundred citizens underwent closed-door grilling by the committee, and while many protested its blatant denial of their civil liberties, none actually refused to testify.

None, that is, but one: In 10/1957, the committee summoned a Quaker printer named David Scull. Scull was

not directly involved in any desegregation lawsuits, but he was a longtime NAACP supporter, and a staunch civil libertarian. They had called him first the month before, and were stunned when he quietly defied them.

So in Tenth Month, the Committee called him again, and again he refused, stating in part that "my position is consistent, I believe, with the ancient testimony of the Religious Society of Friends upholding the rights of the individual against the tyranny of government." The committee, unimpressed, took David to court the next week, where he was found guilty of contempt, fined \$100 dollars and given a 10-day jail sentence. The U.S. Supreme Court later vindicated his defiance.

## QUAKER CHUCKLES

### Making It Perfectly Clear

"What do you mean," insisted the Hicksite, "that we liberal Friends don't believe in Jesus? Of course we do. We believe he came to separate the chic from the gauche."

### Grounds for Disownment, #1

What did the shy Friend say when he came courting bearing a newly-blossoming rose for his plain-dressed lady love? What else but:

"This bud's for thee."

### Grounds for Disownment, #2

Or was it this couple's young son, several years later, who was coming in from the garden when his mother asked if he had dug that new potato and he answered, "Sure, mom. This spud's for thee."

### This Is No Joke

I hope Friends will consider sending gift subscriptions to *A Friendly Letter* this holiday season.