

AN ACT OF GOD?

The Guidance of Quaker Religious Education¹

By Daniel A. Seeger

To engage in religious education is to confront a profound mystery. For, in fact, there is nothing we can accomplish out of mere human contrivance to advance our own conversion or sanctity, either as individuals or as a community. Our advance on the spiritual path is an expression of the work of God alone. At the same time it is right that we make some effort. While we question all humanly contrived religion, it is nevertheless fitting that we organize committees to plan curricula, and that we establish a time at which First Day meeting for worship will gather. Our task as religious educators is nothing short of seeking to live in a prayerful and God-centered way ourselves. We must practice the disciplines, understood as gateways to grace, so consistently and reliably, that there can be hope that our work on behalf of the Religious Society of Friends will express a divine leading rather than a series of human stratagems. As it has been said, the wind of God's grace is always blowing, and it will take us where it will, but we must raise our sails (Vivekenanda). Yet, having raised our sails, we must understand that we come to God by love, not by navigation (Saint Augustine).

The irony here, it seems to me, is that the more we discount the dimension of human striving and creativity as legitimate, the more we are driven to insisting that we have authority from God alone for everything we do, and what starts as humility might be subtly transformed into great pretension, a pretension of the sort which has so often been a blight on religious enterprise.

It has been said that the only proper goal of religious education is to bring ourselves and others to God's door, and to let God do the work. Coventry Patmore has written, "The work of the Church . . . is not to teach the mysteries of life, so much as to persuade the soul to that arduous degree of purity at which God Himself (*sic*) becomes her teacher. The work of the Church ends when the knowledge of God begins."

It is difficult to regard religious education merely as a department of the church, carrying out a prescribed task on behalf of the whole as instructed by the whole. In a sense, as people laboring to serve our religious community in the field of spiritual formation and nurture we cannot act independently of some conception, hopefully a divinely inspired conception, of the condition of our religious community, and of what is needed to address that condition. Our work can never be some sort of routinized business as usual. Furthermore, we cannot escape the fact that what we do or what

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we fail to do will, for better or worse, have great impact on the future of the Religious Society of Friends. Religious education is a matter of the widest possible scope and import. To do it well requires a very broad view of the state of our religious community and its needs.

Clearly, the "creedlessness" of the Religious Society of Friends is something in which many contemporary meeting members and attenders take great satisfaction. Many celebrate the Religious Society of Friends as a place where they can be completely "free," and where no indelicate challenges will be offered to whatever religious convictions they arrived with. Often people favoring the idea that our Religious Society's salient characteristic is its non-creedalism will acknowledge that spiritual growth and development are desirable, but such development will be presumed to spring from within each of us as individuals according to a dynamic rooted in each individual's own nature, rather than as a result of any tutelage one might receive from the Meeting as a corporate body. There is a kind of prickliness about anything that might be considered eldership or teaching authority. The logical extension of this train of thought is a vision of a religious society which is a loose coalition of individuals each inventing her or his own faith, who are tied together mainly by the common ethic that none will rock another's boat.

In planning our religious education, simply to assume that we are to be guided by the current trends and directions in our religious community is a far-reaching decision, and might possibly be a fatal one. So, once again, we come to a profound paradox; we skate on thin ice between a paralyzing humility, on the one hand, and a pretentiousness that can flaunt and fail, on the other. And once again, we must rely in our weakness on the strength of God.

Third, I doubt that one can do authentic religious education without having at hand a vision of the needs of the entire human community in our day. As religious educators we should be seeking Guidance on the question: "What does the Lord require of us as a people?" Given the current state of human affairs, what, in the unfolding destiny of the Creation, would a Spirit-led people do, to what would they witness, what way of life would they adopt in order to address the needs of their fellow human beings now and in the future? How would they as a people be patterns and examples for a culture which would support the next phase of human development?

I know this can sound over-ambitious, but I believe that just as Jesus read the signs of his time, we must read the signs of ours. As religious educators, we are not concerned with a strategy for preserving and carrying on a small, marginalized religious sect where people can gather for comfort and support because they have some vague spiritual yearnings but do not seem to fit comfortably into anyone else's religion. Yesterday Marty Grundy confidently asserted that the Religious Society of Friends has a great treasure of Truth, a big, rich story. She asked if we have forgotten most of it. Marty Grundy's assertion that we have a big, rich story is a simple truth, and I sympathize with her hint that we are in danger of losing this treasure.

The program asks that we address the question "What is Quaker spirituality?" I first

tried to determine what the word "spirituality" meant, intending then to proceed to describe Quaker spirituality. The dictionary I had at hand was of little help. It spoke about spirituality as something non-material. I then consulted some of my favorite religious writers. I found that many people bravely write about spirituality as if both they and their readers know exactly what it is they are referring to, but without ever defining the term. People seem willing to define prayer and contemplation, but not spirituality. So here is my own, made up, working definition:

Spirituality -- a perspective, and a way of living derived from it, which gives expression to beliefs about God, about the ultimate meaning of human existence, and about the nature and purpose of the Creation; this perspective and this way of living are intended to mold the nature of the practitioner, while at the same time also giving expression to his or her human character and deep commitments.

Quaker spirituality, in particular, is rooted in a confidence that divine guidance is available to the gathered community; that with it we can be shown what, under existing circumstances, we must unflinchingly do; that worship, based on silence and obedience, and meeting for business conducted in the unique manner of Friends, are ways of placing us at God's door; and that there are testimonies involving peaceableness, simplicity, justice, and equality which give expression to a true understanding of the relationship between God and the human estate. These are some of the elements of the big, rich story which is the gift of Quaker spirituality.

I also believe that if we prayerfully and from a silent, God-centered place consider the emerging global culture and its characteristics we will see that this great treasure, this Truth, this big, rich story, has enormous relevance to the spiritual needs of the human community. Now I do not think it is our job somehow to convert everyone to Quakerism. But I do believe that as a spiritual community we have a very important role to play in the unfolding destiny of the Creation as God intends it to be. For me to try to describe some of the details of how this might be so would take too much time. I know that any vision of this which I or another person or group might set forth would require much refinement in a corporate, Spirit-led discernment process. But, it seems to me, as spiritual educators we have to know whether or not we are preparing people for a great service to the Lord or not. Are we in danger of thinking in too small and parochial a way? Religion, properly understood, is not only about the private encounter of the individual soul with God. We must never fall into the trap of believing that to drag religion from the depths of the individual human heart into an encounter with the groanings and sufferings of the world is to contaminate it. Our imitation of God in this life must be an imitation of Christ. It is true that Jesus spent forty days and forty nights in a desert retreat. But our model is also the Jesus, not only of the desert, and not only of Calvary, but the Jesus of the workshop, of the dusty roads, the Jesus who suffered clamorous demands and surly oppositions, the Jesus who sometimes lacked of all peace and privacy, the Jesus who suffered endless interruptions. Jesus shows us the Divine life operating under human conditions.

Finally, as people seeking to serve in the field of religious education, we first need to

be faithful Friends. We need to give ourselves the time and space to nourish our own progress on the spiritual path. As has been mentioned, Jesus did spend time in the desert, and prayed frequently. We, too, have to be genuinely engaged in the spiritual life for its own sake. This should be something we do out of a kind of enchantment, and not simply something we view as the first step on the way to an exhausting superactivism in many benevolent committees. Our spiritual life ought not be merely a preparation for some sort of works righteousness.

As religious educators for Quakerism, we have to be aware that if George Fox on Pendle Hill saw a great people to be gathered, part of our job is to uphold the gathering process itself. We have to be aware that, as religious educators from several monthly and yearly meetings, we are not intended to labor in our own vineyards as if the rest of Quakerism did not exist. We have a responsibility to cultivate among ourselves the largeness of vision and the unity which we hope will overtake everyone in the Religious Society of Friends. In part this can occur in gatherings such as this one; but such gatherings are not enough. There has to be an on-going, day-in, day-out work through dialogue, traveling in the ministry, and publication.

To do this while also trying to run our adult Religious Education programs may seem extraordinarily ambitious. But what I am suggesting is indeed possible. It is important for each of us to remember that we, personally, do not have to do everything. It is exactly the unity and gatheredness under the Guidance of the Holy Spirit which makes great things possible. As we act in harmony with the Holy Spirit, the elements of a great work will fall into place without asking of anyone the impossible because our individual efforts become part of a whole unified mosaic. I am reminded of something someone once told me about Mother Theresa. When Mother Theresa was asked how she could possibly have accomplished so much, she is said to have replied: "I pray for six hours every day." The proper attention to the things of the Spirit usually enlarges our scope, rather than narrowing it. The possibility of accomplishing more should not be our motive for our devotions. Thirst for the bread of life itself is sufficient impulse. But it is interesting to note, I think, that in her great work on mysticism, Evelyn Underhill observes that people who advance far on the contemplative path become activists. She writes: "It is the peculiarity of the Unitive Life that it is often lived, in its highest and most perfect forms, in the world; and it exhibits its works right before the eyes of men (sic). ...Hence, the enemies of mysticism, who have easily drawn a convenient moral from the 'morbid and solitary' lives of the contemplatives in the earlier and educative stages of the Mystic Way, are here confronted very often by the disagreeable spectacle of the mystic as the pioneer of humanity, a sharply intuitive and painfully practical person: an artist, a discoverer, a religious or social reformer, a national hero, a 'great active' among the saints."

Perhaps it would not be unseemly for me to say just a word or two about Pendle Hill. For Pendle Hill occupies a unique place in the Quakerism of the United States, as does Woodbrooke in England, especially with regard to the matter of adult religious education.

One of the tasks of the religious education enterprise is to preserve, to teach, and to

insure the continued availability of the gathered wisdom of the spiritual community. Our Quaker tradition holds up for us a vision of human life expressing our best possibilities, showing us their nobility and attractiveness. Pendle Hill's work reflects the truth that at least part of every person's growth on the spiritual path arises from a humble willingness to listen to, and profit by, the lessons from the past. So in retreats, workshops, and courses lasting anywhere from two days, to a week, to ten weeks, Pendle Hill offers opportunities to study the Bible and Quaker history, Quaker faith, and Quaker practice, and to live in a community committed to enacting Quakerism in a daily life focused on worship, work and study. We also practice and teach various crafts as contemplative disciplines.

But Pendle Hill is not only concerned with the lessons from the past; it is also future-oriented. As Friends we often speak of continuing revelation. Sometimes this idea is used as an excuse to neglect the past, as if this continuing revelation we expect will somehow supercede or obliterate what came before. Personally, I like to think of continuing revelation in two ways. One way is to think of continuing revelation as an ongoing and deepening awareness, a continuing revelation, of the richness and depth of our tradition and its applicability to our daily living in the present. Another way I think of it is as an extrapolation of the animating vision of the past to the new and unprecedented events of our own day. We cannot blindly or mechanically mimic the past. Conditions inevitably change, either slowly or cataclysmically. Newly discovered short-comings of social and religious institutions come into view as awareness deepens. The religious sensibility constantly seeks an enlargement of the sustaining vision and a greater perfection in the expression it is given in institutions and in practices.

The significance of this process of continually revelation is especially conspicuous in ages of transition, like our own, when the old order is disintegrating and being replaced by something new. Friends, like others, need prayerfully to seek a way forward toward a future which will be different than the past. So another aspect of Pendle Hill's ministry is focused ahead. It is to support this search for Guidance and vision. Pendle Hill is by no means some sort of think tank proposing solutions to the world's spiritual dilemmas. But we hope to be a devotional meeting place where Friends can gather in an atmosphere of prayer and worship for searching dialogue. Pendle Hill is a space where people concerned about the Religious Society of Friends and its ministry to the human condition can come for sharing, can speak the truth as they understand it, and can listen creatively to others as they speak the truth as they understand it. When love performs these two offices -- speaking and listening -education and community happen, and the Holy Spirit can show the way forward.

The program asks if our religious education programs can be rooted in Quaker spirituality and tradition, while drawing on resources from other traditions. My experience at Pendle Hill indicates that this is indeed possible, for we have people of all persuasions as part of our community. We regularly benefit from the participation of evangelical and programmed Friends, of ministers, priests and nuns from other branches of the Christian Church, of people from the spiritual traditions of the east, and of people conversant with the spirituality of Native Americans and other indigenous

peoples. Yet, the spirituality of Pendle Hill is, I am confident, distinctly a Quaker one of the unprogrammed variety .But there are several things to keep in mind.

What might be called "Way-hopping" seems rarely to produce a deep quality of soul. Many people go through a period of Way-hopping as a sort of transition or preparation, and this is authentic and legitimate for some seekers. But one rarely becomes deeply spiritual without immersion in a specific spirituality and without practicing its disciplines with utmost conscientiousness over a sustained period of time. One can appreciate the beauty and the depth of another spiritual tradition, and can be illumined by it, from a rootedness in the depths of one's own tradition. I doubt that habitual wayfarers can really appreciate the depth of any particular spirituality .The unity felt by Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama when they met each other grew out of each person's deep awareness of and practice of his own religion. A superficial Christian and a superficial Buddhist would much be more likely to regard each other as strangers, except, perhaps, to the extent each had been spiritually formed by the culture of commerce and technology, which might enable them to form a bond on that basis. Universalist Friends do not really recommend abandoning the conscientious practice of our own Quaker spirituality. In fact, it is the conscientious practice of Quaker spirituality which will enliven us to the truth and beauty available in other traditions.

The other thing to keep in mind about the resources of other traditions is that when deep spiritual sharing is going on, each person must use his or her own vocabulary. Quakers, especially, can appreciate the limitations of words, creeds, and language in expressing the ineffable mysteries and realities of faith. But this awareness helps us understand that communication about faith often involves the use of subtle and poetic expressions. It often involves the use of parables and metaphors. One cannot expect deep sharing to occur among people if each is trying to employ some sort of spiritual Esperanto when speaking. Rather, the burden of translation, if dialogue is to be genuine, must be on the listener. The irony of the present condition of the Religious Society of Friends is that many people are willing to practice this creative listening when hearing Sufi or Vedantic terms or images, but are intolerant of Christian vocabulary. This is perfectly understandable. Many of us, myself included, are refugees from Christian malpractice experienced in other denominations. To hear familiar Christian formulations used among Friends makes us feel that a safe space we have found is being invaded by an enemy. This general situation is not helped by the fact that in the larger society outside of Friends public dialogue where religion is concerned seems to be monopolized by an aberrant form of Christianity whose promulgators associate it with a regressive and conservative brand of politics. As a result everyone becomes allergic to Christianity and is driven into a secular corner.

But with a moment's reflection we can appreciate that to be friendly to vocabulary and thought forms derived from world religions outside of Christianity while being intolerant of Christianity itself is not a truly universalist perspective. After all, every religious tradition has its dark side; Christianity is scarcely unique in that respect. So while affirming with enthusiasm the possibility of being uplifted by the resources of other spiritual traditions, I want also to encourage a mindfulness that it would be unwise and self-defeating for us to ignore the precious treasures that come to us from within the

Christian tradition if we are to be authentic religious educators for Quakerism.

When we contemplate the field of religious education, we see a panorama which is awesome. I wonder how many of us, when we were first drawn into this field, anticipated so rich a challenge. Perhaps we first got involved because our meeting needed someone, and no one else was available to serve. Surely our calling is no less Providential for that. We are participating in a miraculous unfoldment. Let us have great respect of the work we have taken on, and great compassion for ourselves and for each other as we address it. From this vision of our work, let us find the fullness of heart to carry it out bravely, remaining always eager to come to one another's support, and lovingly aiding the members of our Religious Society of Friends in their search for Truth, so that we all might give witness to it.