

Weeds Among the Wheat

By

Arthur O. Roberts



SHREWSBURY LECTURE

“Now was I come up in spirit through the flaming sword into the paradise of God.” GEORGE FOX

5

THE SHREWSBURY LECTURES

Shrewsbury Meeting was already established in 1672, when George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, visited America. He says in his Journal, published by Cambridge University Press: "And soe wee came to Shrewsberry & on the first day of the weeke wee had a pretious meettinge... & friends & other people came farr to this Meettinge; & on ye 2d of the 7th month wee had a mens (& weomens) Meettinge, out of the most parts of ye new Country Jarsie, which will be of great service in keepinge ye Gospell order & Government of Christ Jesus...and there is a Monthly & A Generall Meettinge sett up and they are buildinge A Meettinge place in the midst of them."

In preparation for the tercentenary, in 1972, of George Fox's visit to America, an annual Shrewsbury Lecture is given on some basic aspect of Quakerism. A particular phase of the special emphasis which Quakerism gives to the Christian message is presented. The community and Monmouth County in particular are invited on this occasion, known as Old Shrewsbury Day, to join with Friends who "came farr to this Meettinge" to learn together from him who is the Light of the World.

Number 1 - **Jesus and Judaism** and **The Emphasis of Jesus** by Henry J. Cadbury, member of the committee who prepared the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Number 2 - **The Religion of the Quaker Journalist**, as disclosed in the literature of spiritual autobiography, by Howard H. Brinton, Director Emeritus of Pendle Hill, an adult center for religious and social study.

(continued on back cover)

Weeds Among the Wheat,

A Quaker Approach to Christian Relevance

By

Arthur O. Roberts

SHREWSBURY LECTURE

given at

Shrewsbury Friends Meeting

Highway 35 and Sycamore Avenue

Shrewsbury, New Jersey

Sixth Month 20, 1965

JOHN WOOLMAN PRESS, INC.

4002 North Capitol Avenue

Indianapolis, Indiana

1965

Copyright 1964, JOHN WOOLMAN PRESS, INC.

Preface

Arthur Roberts views the Quaker approach to Christian relevance against the background of the witness and teaching of the total Church. He finds that Quakers can profit from seeing themselves in the perspective. He fits his own shrewd analysis of some of the problems of our time into the continuum of Quaker experience. An experience in which the patience which the parable enjoins was an important ingredient; and which at its best gave man one world to live in. The Quakers' "yea" and 'nay' became actualized in material commerce, and their business ethics reflected deep dwelling in Christ, who is the oath of God."

Today, a universe rent to the core by sin awaits "the redemption of men who find in Jesus Christ the context of reason and its several systems which apprehend or utilize reality." It is time to reiterate "the unity of truth - creative, redemptive, and judgmental."

Against the new humanism which sees man as "the measure of all things," this kind of a context "prevents moral reform from degenerating into a mad scramble for position, a musical chairs game for justice which never quite reaches round." "Sometimes we have loved causes and not people, races but not persons, rights by not privileges." But we are in the midst of a "new awakening toward a spiritual interpretation of life itself, as well as the forms of knowledge." "In an age which too easily supposes that moral reform takes place only by lobby pressure and legislative action," "can we not hope that the unity of creation and redemption can be recovered?" We know also that "no new morality will suffice until it seeks both truth and love."

D. F. [Dean Freiday]

Arthur O. Roberts

A recorded Friends minister (Oregon Yearly Meeting). Arthur Roberts has divided his ministerial career almost equally between the pastorate and teaching. From 1944-1953, while completing his education, he held various pastorates within the limits of Oregon, Indiana, and Kansas Yearly Meetings, and in New Hampshire. Since 1953 he has taught at George Fox College in Newberg, Oregon, where he is chairman of the division of Religion and Philosophy and director of the honors program.

He has a B.D. from Nazarene Theological Seminary, and did graduate work at Harvard and Boston Universities, leading to a Ph.D. in church history from the latter in 1954.

Editor of the Quaker journal Concern, he has contributed articles to various publications including Christianity Today. His book Through Flaming Sword is a spiritual biography of George Fox, founder of Quakerism.

Chairman of Oregon Yearly Meeting's Committee on Friends Ecumenical Relations, and a member of the Administrative Council, Association of Evangelical Friends, he is also a member of the steering and editorial committees of Quaker Religious Thought.

Weeds Among the Wheat.

A Quaker Approach to Christian Relevance

Most of us live in cities and leave the farming to others. Despite this fact, however, we manage to keep our hands in the soil, even if it is only to dig dandelions from the window box or fight crab grass in our lawns. We can still understand the feelings of the man in Jesus' parable who found his whole wheat field infested with weeds that had been maliciously planted.

This familiar parable is a lesson in Christian patience in the face of evil, a patience to which Quakers at their best - and even in their failures - have given testimony. An occasion of this sort seems appropriate for reflecting upon the Quaker movement at several points within the framework of this parable. Hopefully such reflection may cast light on a crucial issue facing Christianity: how to speak relevantly to our world today.

Candor requires us to recognize a considerable groundswell of unbelief. This consists not only of personal moral doubts, but also a judgment that the Church just does not have anything to say. The remark of a prominent educator illustrates this. He said that inasmuch as the Judeo-Christian value system is gone, it is up to the school teachers to invent and teach a new myth which will keep society solvent.

In baseball language, the Church has missed a curve ball. The ball may have been curving on a steady trajectory upon leaving the pitcher's hand, but it was too late when the implications were discovered. The umpires have not yet decided whether this is strike three, although some of the Church's opponents and even certain gloomy partisans claim that it is. Some even allege that it is the last of the ninth inning. But perhaps it was a foul tip.

In any case Christians suddenly wonder why and how they have missed their chance. Evil proliferates everywhere as public and private morals degenerate to the accompaniment of dissonant music, frenetic dancing, and "sick" literature. How could we have missed so badly? Is there nothing left to do but return to the dugout with the cry that this is the "post-Christian era" ringing in our ears? Or should we simply ham up last place and give the fans a laugh? Or write our memoirs for the sports fans?

Turning from baseball to weeds, let us look first to Jesus' story, then reflect upon some Quaker experiences which may help us see Christian relevancy for today.

The Parable

Jesus' story is found in Matthew's gospel, chapter 13. In the Revised Standard Version it reads as follows:

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?" He said to them, "An enemy has done this." The servants said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he said, "No lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, 'Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Prompted by his disciples, Jesus explained his story:

He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them in the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

A parable uses analogy for illustration. The context indicates how the hidden meanings are brought out. Because the picture that is drawn is vivid or familiar, it finds lodging in the mind and the meaning soaks in, like a penetrating oil. In conceptual terms the parable teaches that evil is real, cosmic, and pervasive; tolerance is based on God's sovereignty rather than man's merits; and good is judged as such on the basis of God's word in Christ.

We will talk about angels and devils later - if you have been uneasy, suffice it now to say the parable advises tolerance of evil-doers in the hope that God will do something about the situation. If we may generalize further, the enemy's trick is to invade the Master's field and spoil his crop, opposing truth with error and love with hate and on these two other sins depend. In the resulting confusion of values men realize that they are not God. As George Fox said, "There is no serpent in the truth."

Human Hopes and Christian Relevance

Man aspires to know, to do, to relate to others, to relate to God; and his aspirations revolve around the polarities of truth and love. Knowledge systematically followed in pursuit of ends in life we call science. Science is the instrument whereby man extends his being, to be free for. But science which is no longer rooted in Divine reality becomes sophistry. Our modern forms of sophistry through advertising and propaganda are instruments of power over, rather than freedom for. Thus truth conveyed in words has lost its credibility as a bridge from God to us and from us back to God.

Man aspires to know in order to do. Aesthetics reflects the “doing” of life, the sharing of God’s creativity. A true end in life it involves, in pure type, activity valuable for its own sake. But without foundation in truth and love aesthetics become increasingly esoteric and a form of intellectual snobbery.

Man aspires to relate to others, to love. Morality consists in working out life meaningfully and respectfully with others. When morality is not derived from God it becomes a cultural tyranny exercised over people, who struggle against it in their quest for freedom.

Man’s religious aspiration is to reverence God, to find his final place of being in Him. If he stops short through the absence of truth or love he becomes idolatrous.

Such is a way of depicting the world into which the good seed is sown. If the Church speaks its “good news” effectively, it will give faith dimensions that are within the range of man’s aspirations.

Quakers and Science

It strikes us as odd when in the midst of his ecstatic “flaming sword” vision of holiness, George Fox declared that all the creation had a “new smell.” (My closest point of reference is my friends who speak in similar vein upon quitting tobacco.) Indeed, our founder caught such an intuitive glimpse of creation he thought “to practice physic for the good of mankind.” I am glad he did not, but rather left this vision to the illustrious Dr. Fothergill, beloved physician, botanist, and member of the Royal Society, who added patient research.

The Quaker contribution to scientific endeavor is significant when we consider the early disdain for formal learning. Along with a suspicion of ministers trained at Cambridge or Oxford, there was a preference for Scriptural rather than scholastic terminology. There was also a general resistance to cultural forms which others have usually considered liberating to the human spirit. “Let their learning be liberal,” said Fox, “but let it be useful knowledge, consistent with truth and godliness.” William Penn preferred the study of things to the study of languages. But humanities gained a hearing now and again, and began to flourish with the development of a widespread system of higher education during the nineteenth century.

Early Friends gave “reason” no autonomous position. Christ the Word spoke truth to man who used knowledge to worship God and manage His creation. In some ways Quakers took a rather pragmatic view of life in this world, extending to disciplined lengths the Protestant work ethic which has borne so importantly upon Western culture. Their stewardship of the earth rested upon the unity of creation, redemption, and judgment found in Christ, the Word.

The language of the apostle, John, provided their thought form: “In the beginning was the Word.” The Quakers brought this “logos” theology to bear upon rising industrial developments. Spirit and technology produced a succession of earnest industrialists, tradesmen, land promoters’ farmers, business men, bankers, and a stream of conscientious professional men - especially phy-

sicians and teachers. Thus the Quaker spirit was more congenial to the “useful sciences” than to the world of the theatre or the arts. At its best the Quakers experience gave man one world to live in, not two. Their “yea” and “nay” became actualized in material commerce, and their business ethics reflected deep dwelling in Christ, who is the oath of God. Except, of course, as familiarity bred contempt.

We stand once more in a mushrooming technical culture, of a kind some consider without precedent. A new kind of humanism replaces the classic tradition wherein the churches usually stood in the Western world. Athens has been replaced by Sparta. A “classical education” seems irrelevant to many, despite heroic efforts to combat it, such as crash language programs which tend, however, to become part of the competition for position.

The Church has both encouraged the great cultural movements of the past and in turn been molded by their forms. But now the computer occupies the stage in the scientific drama of world revolution. Can we not hope that the unity of creation and redemption can be recovered? Robert Barclay began his Apology on the premise that “revelation” was not contrary to Scripture and “right reason.” In Christ all knowledge is unified.

This is hard for men to see today: it appears obscure and irrelevant to bring theology into the picture, for several reasons. The data of knowledge has proliferated greatly, scientism dominated the first half of our century, to the minimizing of religious perspectives, and knowledge has made annihilation possible. We may gain some hope, however. In the history of thought, the proliferation of analysis leads eventually to synthesis of thought in new constructs wherein isolated parts dissolve within more meaningful wholes. Furthermore, scientism is crumbling, in part because of loud disclaimers of omniscience by many natural scientists, and partly because of a new leadership in theology. Significant to the new awakening toward a spiritual interpretation of life itself as well as the forms of knowing are the posthumous works of Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit paleontologist, who makes Christ the omega point toward which all reality, including life and thought, moves.

What word can Christianity speak to science? If our Quaker experience, including lapses into assorted materialisms, is of any help, we may reiterate the unity of truth - creative, redemptive, and judgmental. It is the word given by the apostle Paul: “we demolish sophistries and all that rears its proud head against the knowledge of God; we compel every human thought to surrender in obedience to Christ,” 2 Cor. 10: 5 -6 NEB.

That word for today is the hope expressed in Romans, “the universe itself is to be freed from the shackles of mortality and enter upon the liberty and splendour of the children of God,” Rom. 8:21, NEB. The tares in the wheat constitute more than environmental determinism accounting for variant behaviour. Here is portrayed a universe rent to the core by sin, awaiting the redemption of men who find in Jesus Christ the context of reason and its several systems which apprehend or utilize reality.

In the Puritan era men may have zealously sought to extirpate the weeds, but at least they knew the field was God's. But in the tolerance which Quakers helped bring about, men forgot the ends for the means. The spiritual force attendant upon the awakening of modern science gave way to immediate tasks of business and commerce, or whatever, so that reason stood autonomous, needing neither immediate guidance of the Holy Spirit nor Scripture. In the new humanism (what the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel calls "practical anthropocentrism") modern man extended to cosmic dimensions the ancient Greek formula, "man is the measure of all things."

Quakers and Aesthetics

As we ponder aesthetics we may wonder what Quakers have to contribute to the search for Christian relevancy. Early Friends were Puritans in their distrust of the superfluous and the merely decorative, and fairly spartan concerning the useful. This frame of "sobriety" continued through the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth. Its mark is still upon us, even though most of us have become "gay Quakers." The membership and corporate life of the Society of Friends received much of its structure in matters of discipline dealing with the aesthetic and moral aspects of life. Indeed, nearly all activities bearing on aesthetics came under moral scrutiny. Consider as representative, the following passage from Thomas Clarkson's Portraiture, published in 1806 - mid-point in our history. After admitting that "providence gave originally to man a beautiful and a perfect world," he laments man's avarice which often ruins it. So far almost in the pattern of Rousseau.

Clarkson then speaks wistfully, it seems, about how instrumental music tends "to calm and tranquilize the passions." He continues:

The ideas which it excites are of the pleasant, benevolent, and social kind. It leads occasionally to joy, to grief, to tenderness, to sympathy; but never to malevolence, ingratitude, anger, cruelty, or revenge: for no combination of musical sounds can be invented, by which the latter passions can be excited in the mind without the intervention of the human voice.¹

But, alas, he complains, music's abuse almost inevitably accompanies its use; furthermore, such perfection has been reached that it cannot please unless great proficiency has been achieved and this comes only at the expense of time. Young women, especially, neglect learning the housewifely arts in favor of music which they soon abandon for housekeeping anyway. A "criminal waste of time," opines Clarkson.

This wide-ranging commentator clinches his arguments against music (and, subsequently, novels) by claiming the sedentary nature of the practice renders young ladies of a generally "sick and languid constitution, and to be disqualified more than others from becoming healthy wives, or healthy mothers, or parents of healthy progeny."²

Well, here is a man soberly attacking admittedly pleasant aesthetic pleasures on pragmatic arguments. He does provide other arguments, it is true, to show the dangers of sin through the senses. But in dampening these pleasures the whole excitement of the first generation of Quakers is lost! Duty, not joy predominates. Plato had objected to poets and painters in his utopia, because these experiences were third-hand acquaintance with reality. He preferred his ideas straight, undiluted by sensations or their copies. To seventeenth century Quakers, Christ so vividly presented himself to the experience that indirect enjoyments seemed subordinate. This high sense of Presence has given us a legacy of sobriety, sometimes more somber than joyful, to this day. It is in our experiences of worship that this sense of Presence is best caught.

George Fox wrote an essay, "To the High and Lofty Ones," whom he accused of bowing of teneer with the hat and knee to one another than to the Lord. They were caught up in the social whirl, as we would say. He shamed them for their pride and vanity, and urged them to delight in the Creator more than what He has created, to take pleasure in the giver of the good, "in Him alone, and in His judgments."³

He had rather harsh things to say to women who wore "ribands" and gold laces and men with double cuffs and feathers in their caps, and to the gay, indifferent lads who bowled on the lawn outside his prison window. Which of us is not thankful for some of the Puritan blasts at Cavalier frivolity. Men do not wear powdered wigs, at least, and for that I am glad.

Simplicity has much to commend it in aesthetics, and at its fountain speaks of Jesus Christ, the Word, who for our sakes was made poor that we through his poverty might be made rich. Our forefathers in the faith revered God alone, refusing pretentious bowing and scraping and doffing the hat to this world's great.

But when persecution abated, the "children of light" worried unduly about how to mark the weeds from the wheat. Margaret Fell Fox, who outlived her husband considerably, saw the paralysis of legalism and deplored as a "silly gospel" increasing severity of dress and comportment.

We should not fail to appreciate how simplicity in dress became a practical test of consecration and obedience, a test told poignantly in the story of Betsy Gurney, who struggled through to obedience as a "plain Friend," and as Elizabeth Fry, put on the adornment of the heart in her services of love. She told Bible stories to the ragged urchins of the villages and comforted those in prison with such love as to become a Quaker "saint."

How to determine what is scruple, and what is meaningful consecration, has never been easy for Friends. In my judgment, we should never reflect upon this past and dismiss the plain ways as "quaint." In our immediate past are examples of Friends who have torn off wedding bands or mortgaged farms to give sacrificially to missions. We may not safely predict at what place tangible evidence of losing oneself for the sake of the Gospel occurs, but take place it must!

Can we not say that in the area of aesthetics our search has been for the authentic? Not only has this jewel been found by those who through discipline have found peace with God and mean-

ingful stewardship, but also by those who have placed it at the core of beauty, as in the poems of Whittier, or the journals and diaries of the past. Structure bends to content and thus partakes of truth.

Asceticism did not work, of course; for gray cloth, imported from France was a status symbol in the eighteenth century, as is the second - hand Salvation Army garment that is worn unwashed by twentieth century bearded ascetics, conspicuous for their own brand of ostentation. But from the experience at its best we learn of a simplicity which leaves more to invest in friendships with the oppressed, Bibles for the newly-literate, food for the hungry, and transportation for those who preach the Gospel to the poor. We may profitably ponder how the Church today may give tangible evidence of our concern for God's world.

In conversation with a leading Quaker architect, recently, I learned of the latest rage , a "Hollywood rococo," if you please - "his" and "her" bathrooms with gold-plated fixtures at \$15,000 each. When asked if he would contract such a job, he shook his head, no, and volunteered he would not be party, even, to using simulated wood paneling. If it is to look like wood, he wants it to be wood. He strives to be authentic. Is this just professionalism? No, not just professionalism, I think, but true professionalism in which the burden for truth rests upon one who would share in God's creativity.

Who are the "high and lofty ones" of today, to use George Fox's words? Might they not be the culturally elite who listen to "proper" music because it is on some approved list, or the culturally deprived kids who scream over the Beatles because smart operators manipulate mass media? Or perhaps sophisticated reactors who chant folk songs about heaven and Jesus without believing in either?

Do aesthetics have to be characterized by manipulated opinion unrelieved by boredom in endless longing for beauty? Is there not some word from God to provide meaning for the various art forms, so that performance is by truth and participation by love? The deliberate breaking of the rules and systems which obtains in jazz, abstract painting, plotless plays, and junky sculpture - to what extent is it a legitimate breaking up of pomposity and pretense, and to what extent is it but idolatrous reaction? I do not know; but I feel the tides of aesthetics ebb and flow between classicism and romanticism, reaching after God.

If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, God put it there. When God is forgotten, the eye clouds and the vision blurs. Our Quaker experience surely teaches the Church to have a care about applauding too eagerly what "worldly" culture approves, even though it is difficult to decide where the weeds begin and end. Middle class Christians tend so to seek social acceptance (even to win the world for Christ) that they sometimes approve without discrimination much of questionable value - in the name of culture. Perhaps our sense of "yea" and "nay" should lead the Church stoutly to protest some prurient novel or lustful picture, rather than rationalize meanings to drape about them.

The question is not so much whether painting shall be landscapes, portraits, or abstractions; or whether the music, Beethoven or Bartok or Mendez. The question comes, rather, in how God reveals truth and love. How is authenticity measured? If the theatre portrays the absurd, where is hope portrayed? What is God's answer to Jean Paul Sartre's, "No Exit"? Christian relevance is saying something about the New Jerusalem to the confused freshman at the elite college who affects the clothing of a bum, the hair of a frontiersman, and strums Zion's songs, uncomprehendingly, on a guitar, in company with other members of the society of the anti-establishment. Relevance is saying something about Christ to a civilization which has abandoned the individual to his spiritual loneliness. Relevance is saying something about meaningful activity as a source of creative joy in a mass-pressured society unprepared to use the increased free time that automation will provide.

Quakers and Morality

We feel on surer ground to consider the Quaker experience on matters of morality. We have, indeed, picked up the prophet's mantle as the conscience of the Church on several issues. Surely here we understand the patience of the Gospel in withholding judgment on the evil lest the good be torn up. Early Friends could be very bold and blunt in assailing others with words, if not weapons, but in general, Friends have scrutinized their own behavior before emancipating others from their vices. One of the little ironies of our history, for whatever it is worth, concerns use of tobacco. A Quietist physician, John Rutt, as I recall, made this entry into his diary, "Sinned in smoking for mere pleasure, not for health." Whereas some more recent Friends publications have sought to lift the general frown on the practice by calling it a "meaningful pleasure, even if somewhat harmful."

More significantly, we recognize how the various service concerns of Friends, since the London Meeting of Sufferings, have been handled with patience and often distinction. We have sought to abate cruelty to criminals, and to plead their cause when unjustly accused or inhumanly treated. Committees have sought the abolition of capital punishment, intelligent care of the mentally ill, loving concern for the just claims of aboriginal and minority groups, and arbitration between hostile groups and states. Our heroes include men who freed the slaves and those who drove ambulances as conscientious objectors. The activists such as Levi Coffin mingle in our gallery of greats with the quiet workers such as John Woolman.

We are best known for our peace stand. We need not elaborate on the varied pattern of this stand through seventeenth century England, caught up in civil strife, through the American Revolution, the Civil War, two world wars, and the continuing bloody aftermaths. Under pressure of circumstances, Friends have wavered in this testimony, not just in practice, but in theory. The "Fighting Quaker" meeting house stands among renovated historic buildings in Philadelphia, monument to those of the Revolutionary War period - and a symbol for earnest Friends in other days - who felt God moves in judgment now to pluck the weeds which would engulf the wheat.

It is not an easy testimony, to recognize evil, be willing even to suffer from it, and then give over the work to angels. Driven outward into tension areas, our distinctions blur, and periodically we are brought back to ask again the spiritual basis for our peace testimony, to ask ourselves what it is we are trying to say other than that people get hurt badly with weapons. George Fox refused a commission in Oliver Cromwell's army, an army fighting for saintly rule in England. Fox wrote:

Ye are called to peace, therefore follow it; and that peace is in Christ, not in Adam in the Fall. All that pretend to fight for Christ they are deceived...all that would destroy men's lives are not of Christ's mind, who came to save men's lives.⁴

Importantly, Fox considered peace a matter of following Jesus Christ. The moral issue was rooted in Christ, the Word. This is not the place to discourse at length on our peace stand. I will attempt a generalization, however. The peace stand tends to become relativistic, and justified on pragmatic grounds, as it moves away from a personal conviction fixed upon new life in Christ, the Word. In a world poised for nuclear annihilation, any banner waved, on any grounds, is sobering. At this juncture we ask, "peace, for what purpose?" I remember hearing a CPS assignee relate how he discovered that although he hated war he also hated the "military," and had to be reminded of the common need of all men to be forgiven and made one in Christ.

In the midst of our agitations regarding racial demonstrations, we can learn from our corporate experiences that a "cause" often lacks the saving flavor of Christian grace. Radical and conservative create the tension of social movement. From the earliest visits of George Fox to America, Friends have upheld the dignity and rights of Indian and Negro people; but our concern has not always flowed beyond Philanthropy into Christian evangelism.

The Bible admonishes us to lay down carnal weapons in favor of spiritual ones, lest we destroy wheat in trying to tear up the weeds. These weapons are not just clubs and rifles. Carnality may be expressed in other ways. If we are not careful our preoccupation with justice may prevent us from attending to the business of showing God's forgiving grace to all sinners - oppressed and oppressor.

Revolutions of the spirit have a way of becoming revolutions of the flesh. Woolman's patient laboring gives way to John Brown's fury. Will Martin Luther King's nonviolence give way to the command, "next time, fire"?⁵

If we may view the Quaker experience in the context of Jesus' parable we may learn how Christ the Word, speaking to us of God's creative, redemptive, and judgmental will prevents moral reform from degenerating into a mad power scramble for position, a musical chairs game for justice which never quite reaches round.

To transgress personality in order to make social experiments, to manipulate people, to patronize, these are still carnal, still reactions to prejudice which yet partake of it and cannot help but fail of the balance of love and truth. Sometimes we have loved causes and not people, races

but not persons, rights but not privileges. The cause of Kenyan independence, for example, excited the support of some Friends who for generations gave little thought, prayer, or support to patient missionaries, such as Arthur Chilson, who brought many into Christian faith and practice.

Two hundred years ago John Woolman made a religious journey to visit some people “along the sea-coast from Cape May to near Squan,” a people with no settled worship, to whom he preached the gospel freely “through the goodness of the Heavenly Shepherd.”⁶ His quiet, direct, Spirit-led way of witnessing to wrong speaks to me of the mind of Christ, not to be overlooked in an age which too easily supposes that moral reform takes place only by lobby pressure and legislative action.

We have come in Western culture to the end of Kantian morality, an era of neo-Stoicism in which religion, no longer demonstrable scientifically, was still considered a logical context for understanding our sense of moral obligation. Modern man has begun to challenge that universal moral law, even if refurbished with new phrases, such as Tillich’s “ultimate concern.”

We Friends have coasted along on duty, whether pietistically or socially conceived. No new morality will suffice until it seeks both truth and love. Wilmer Cooper, Dean of the Earlham School of Religion, has well stated, “From a Christian point of view ethics is never autonomous but derives its authority from man’s relationship to God.”⁷

The relevancy of Christianity to the moral aspirations of man depends, then, upon recovery of its religious basis. To these considerations we now turn.

Religious Aspirations

Despite all the talk about Christianity being outmoded, we see vigorous evidence to the contrary. Religious literature abounds. There is excellent scholarship in the fields of Biblical studies, church history, and philosophical theology. The ecumenical movement has awakened interest in that vital question: the nature of religious authority. Theologians are more widely listened to than the philosophers’ who not infrequently bury themselves in semantics. The height of spiritual renewal signaled by the evangelistic efforts of Billy Graham may have waned somewhat. While some church leaders are bending over backwards to accommodate themselves to people in an effort to stem the secular tide, most sincere Christians are soberly and realistically sizing up their position as a minority within rapidly changing cultures.

One of the most exciting things about modern Quakers is that they are no longer afraid to theologize. They have learned that it is possible to experience Christianity and still talk about it coherently, in relationship to historic and Biblical norms.

On the basis of our parable of the weeds and the wheat we may confidently assert one relevant religious lesson to be drawn from the Quaker experience: religious freedom. The Quakers arose in the midst of the seventeenth century when it seemed that every religious group asserted not only its claim to be the true form of Christianity, but claimed exclusive rights. One of the best

ways to understand the particular Quaker contribution to the free church tradition, which we in America have so taken for granted, is to see our movement in relationship to the Fifth Monarchists. These extreme zealots looked for the coming of Jesus in 1660. The beheading of Charles I, in 1649 seemed to them the final proof that the Roman dynasty had come to an end and thus fulfilled Daniel's prophecy. But when the year came and went they decided an act of faith on their part was expected. Accordingly, a little band of them marched on London, expecting Jesus to come in power to back up their token show of force.

In the excitement of this eschatological fervor, in which some turned from religion to parliamentary government or to hopes of communistic social order, the Quakers discovered in an experiential way how Christ, the Risen Lord, has come to lead his Church. "Christ is come, and coming," Fox often said. The kingdom is both here and to be fulfilled at the end of the age.

The early Quaker journals exude excitement that "the pearl of great price" was found in England. It was a time for planting, not for harvesting. Let the angels worry about the judgment. People should be left alone and not be persecuted for religious beliefs, for the Living Word was sweeping the earth. It was the Lamb's war.

Speaking about angels, this is a time for digression. A certain uneasiness may develop among some for whom it has been easier to accept ideas, or concepts, in the spiritual realm, than persons. Cannot we just take it that evil is real, tolerance good, without getting mixed up with angels and so forth? But the issue is not that simple. Philosophically, it may be harder to fill the heavens with clusters of noble ideas and concepts than to fill it with beings. Those who sought to base morality and religion upon such eternal verities are non-plussed to discover modern man refusing to believe in devilishness or devils, goodness or God, and content, instead, to scrap all these things in favor of social engineering, statistically projected. The 1965 Young Friends Epistle from Australia illustrates this trend, in my judgment. Having earlier rejected the supernatural and taken refuge in an "eternal something" which they sought to explain, the epistle reports, this year they are able to accept religion as mythologized human experiences of separation and acceptance. And so they opt for replacing Christ with "the idea of the Man for Others," whom they strive to be.⁸

They sought to convert theology into sociology, but still could not get away from a universal idea! They do not get the point of the existentialist revolt: if God is dead there is no ideological substitute, no outside standard for right and wrong, no basis for either ethics or religion. They have not yet learned why Sartre laughs at Huxley's humanism. They have not yet yielded to despair, for which we may thank God and pray faith will be renewed.

Historically, Quaker religious optimism rests on two theological foundations: 1) the unity of God's revelation in Spirit and in Scripture, and 2) the unity of the outward and inward Christ. On these two points Quakers have been misunderstood and have themselves sometimes floundered. At best these doctrines gave Quakers confidence in a free church, worshipping and witnessing in the power of the Holy Spirit no longer bound to a pope, or council, nor imprisoned in a book, nor subject to the vagaries of contemporary religious experience. As Geoffrey Nuttall has pointed out

in his studies of Puritanism, the struggle was between Spirit and Word, which should have precedence now that hierarchical authority was rejected. The Quakers held doggedly for both, Scripture being the outward rule, Spirit the inward; Spirit the fountain, Scripture the stream.

The question of authority is a significant one today, especially in the light of the insufficiency of the old dogma of liberalism and the new spirit of Biblical inquiry on the part of Roman Catholicism. The early Quaker insights are most perceptive, it seems to me, and bear upon an issue presently clouded by various attempts among Christian thinkers to bring into juxtaposition “event” and “interpretation” in the Christian faith. We have not always been exemplary in preserving this wholeness, as the upheavals which rent our society in the nineteenth century testify.

These same characteristics obtain regarding the Quaker conviction of the unity of Christ within and Jesus Christ who suffered, was crucified, and rose from the dead. We have never quite come to the point of the Dukhobors who periodically elected a Christ from their midst, but certain forms of humanism have partaken of the same idolatry. At times, too, a set of doctrines about Christ, coupled with certain moralisms, has substituted for what early Friends called the Real Presence.

Significantly, it is this vision of Christ which gives to us the meaning of the Church. For it is a people gathered in the power of God - forgiven, baptized with the Holy Spirit, who may meet in the stilling of self and know God’s will among them.

You and I know that our efforts to maintain full, reverential participation in worship and also an effective, Spirit-led ministry have not always been successful. But I am heartened that what is called the “laymen’s movement” in various denominations partakes of much of the vitality which has sometimes marked our movement. The threshing meetings of the first generation, the traveling ministers of the quietistic period, the evangelists of the post-civil war revivals, and the pastors presently ministering in much of Quakerdom - these do not eclipse the general ministry of the Holy Spirit through his ordinary vessels.

Difficult as it has been to convey our sense of worship with its absence of liturgy and outward sacrament, our experience is relevant to a world which is tired of “playing church” either in a cultural performance called worship or a promotion called evangelism.

The Quakers shared with the Anabaptists on the continent and other free-church advocates, the viewpoint that the Church is composed of those who had witnessed Christ in their hearts and sought to live in holy obedience to him. No “christening” could bring one into Christendom, but only God’s Word in Christ.

Our own times still show culture religion. In many ways the Church is ill-defined, mixed up with nation, or social group, or even ethnic aspirations. Said George Fox to the political agitator, Lilbourne, “Friend, thou art too high for truth,” which admonition turned him away from culture-religion and brought him to see the vision of the redeeming Christ and his witnessing Church.

The religious aspirations of the seventeenth century seekers responded to the one who gathered them to Christ, for he had, in the words of one of them given “visible demonstration of having been sent.”

At best this has characterized our varied ministries over the years and from continent to continent. But there are only 200,000 of us. Not very many, really, a diminishing percentage of the Christian population. We may console ourselves with the fact that our influence is beyond our numbers, that rigorous discipline in the past and difficult moral stands in the present make growth slow. We may assert our worship appeals to only certain kinds of folks.

But if the Quaker experience is to offer itself as a case study in relevance we must face our failures. We missed opportunities to evangelize at various points along the line, either by preoccupation with our own holiness or a ponderous system of government which could not quickly seize or maintain opportunities. Perhaps one lesson the Church may learn is that it may, by God’s grace begin anew. It may recover its vision. We have lived through storms of adversity, but now I believe the vision of Christ, the Word of God, shines forth again. I catch glimpses of this in 40,000 African Quakers, one-fifth of our membership, and 12,000 Spanish-speaking believers. That the most vigorous indigenous church in Bolivia is the Bolivian Friends Church encourages me.

We are not alone, of course, but part of the Church to whom Jesus gave the commission to teach all nations, along with his encouragement to patience: “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.”

THE SHREWSBURY LECTURES

(continued from the inside front cover)

Number 3 - **The Christian Mission**, the heart of evangelical faith and its relevance for those of other points of view, by Everett L. Cattell, President, World Evangelical Fellowship.

Number 4 - **Religionless Christianity of George Fox**, lifeless manmade religion replaced by obedience to the living God, by Lewis Benson, Sometime Lecturer, Woodbrooke, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, England.

Number 5 - **Weeds Among the Wheat**, A Quaker approach to Christian relevance, by Arthur O. Roberts, member of the Administrative Council, Association of Evangelical Friends.

All lectures are in print, and available from the John Woolman Press, at 25¢ per copy.

This PDF is Copyright 2010, The Shrewsbury and Manasquan Monthly Meetings of the Religious Society of Friends (Quaker). Views expressed by the author may not be held by either Meeting.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

Notes

¹ Thomas Clarkson, Portraiture of Quakerism (2nd ed. Philadelphia: 1808), pp. 29-30

² Ibid.

³ George Fox, Works (Philadelphia, 1831), N, 50-51.

⁴ George Fox, Journal, ed. Nickalls (Cambridge: 1952), p. 357.

⁵ The command itself is reminiscent of James Baldwin's thesis in, The Fire Next Time (Boston, 1963), that the Negro revolt will turn to violence.

⁶ John Woolman, Journal, Whittier -edition (Philadelphia: 1912), p. 214.

⁷ "Quaker Perspectives on the Nature of Man," Quaker Religious Thought (Vol. II, No.2), p. 17

⁸ Australian Friend (February, 1965): italics mine. See also Concern (April, 1965)