Belief Into Action, Action Into Belief: Religious and Political Aspects of Effective Peacemaking

by
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Shortly after the United States entered World War I, Clarence Pickett was called to be the pastor of the Friends meeting in Oskaloosa, Iowa. He decided to accept the assignment because there were a large number of young men in the meeting who were facing the draft and he had a deep concern for counseling conscientious objectors. His outspoken pacifism, however, soon inflamed the community of Oskaloosa against him. He was thrown out of the local ministers' association because he would not buy a war bond, and one night his house was painted with yellow crosses. All this he and Lilly Pickett endured, but what really hurt was the day that three leading Friends came and offered to buy a war bond in his name, so that the meeting need not share his unpopularity.

Shortly after this, Clarence's great friend Henry Cadbury, a professor at Haverford College, was suspended for writing a letter to the newspaper decrying the vengeful spirit with which the American people were approaching the prospect of making peace with Germany. It was one of many such letters he had written, but it was strongly worded and it brought Haverford College under fire. At the next board meeting when it was decided to suspend him, not one board member spoke in his defense. In fact, very few Friends supported him. One who did was Clarence Pickett, who wrote to say that if Friends missed the golden mean, they usually erred on the side of caution, and no one was punished for being cautious, as Henry was being punished for being hasty. "Thy letter of sympathy was needed and appreciated," Henry wrote. "And I hear thee is having troubles of thy own. Well. Let's stick it."

This story illustrates the principle that yesterday's radicals are today's heroes, but it has another point. After his trial by fire, Henry Cadbury told a friend that he had not known how deeply he felt until he acted. Thereafter, he insisted throughout his long life that action might lead into belief just as

often and as easily as belief into action. Indeed, both he and Clarence Pickett saw the American Friends Service Committee as a vehicle through which men and women, not necessarily all members of the Society of Friends, could engage in social action that might lead to a deepening spiritual experience.

There are varieties of religious experience, Henry Cadbury often said, both without and within the Quaker fold. From the first there have been some Quakers who have had "great openings," great moments of mystical insight, that have led to social action. And there have been many others who have never experienced these mountaintop moments, but who have nevertheless felt a deep commitment to relieving human suffering and establishing peace and whose lives have spoken to their fellow humans while they themselves have gained inner strength and conviction by following the path of social action.

We cannot then be absolute about what is religious and what is political motivation in Quaker action. The lines blur. George Fox, for example, was a simple man who experienced great openings and had a strong sense of divine leading. Yet in pursuit of his efforts to obtain religious liberty for Friends he spent the last years of his life in London, away from his wife, Margaret Fell, and his home in Swarthmoor, in order to make frequent calls on members of Parliament, keeping a schedule that would rival that of Raymond Wilson at the Friends Committee on National Legislation.

The development of the Peace Testimony itself had a purely inner, or religious side, as well as an outer, or political side. There are stories of men in Cromwell's army and navy, literally laying down their arms in the sudden realization that they could no longer fight with outward weapons because of their new religious experience, no matter what the consequence. But when Friends prepared the famous 1660 Declaration: "We utterly deny all outward wars and strife, and fightings with

outward weapons . . ." they did it to protect themselves against the charge of being part of a small violent group associated with the Fifth Monarchy movement, believing that King Jesus would soon be enthroned, and that the violent overthrow of the present king and government was needed to make this come about. In other words, Friends made the statement for a political purpose.

Down through the years Quaker efforts at peacemaking can be roughly grouped into the two categories I have indicated: belief into action (religion) and action into belief (politics) although the lines cross frequently and distinctions blur. The first major effort at Quaker conciliation or peacemaking occurred in this country in 1671, when Friends in Rhode Island attempted to intervene in the war between the Indians and the Massachusetts Bay colonists (ably described by Mike Yarrow in his book *Quaker Experiences in International Conciliation*). This was not a purely disinterested effort, some say, for Quaker political leadership in Rhode Island was at stake. But when British Friends decided to seek an interview with Peter the Great in 1697, they were apparently motivated by a missionary desire to tell him about their discovery that God speaks directly to men and women, and had no thought of the political consequences, the long series of exchanges between Quakers and Russians.

William Penn was a deeply religious man, as accounts of his convincement and sufferings, and his own writings attest. Yet his was a rational as opposed to mystical approach, and he believed the Society of Friends should implement its concerns in a logical and corporate fashion. "No longer can we afford to wait for a motion of the Spirit in everything," he said. His conception and planning of the Holy Experiment was influenced by his friendship with the rationalist philosopher John Locke. In announcing his Frame of Government, he said that "Government seems to me a part of religion itself, a thing sacred in its

institution and end." His essay "Toward the Present and Future Peace of Europe" was an early plea for a logical world government. And his long- kept peace with the native Americans, based on his refusal to allow them to be exploited or treated with disrespect, was a forerunner of many later efforts to achieve peace with justice.

The history of Quaker conscientious objection is largely one of individuals who felt a sudden "stop in my mind," and refused to continue to serve in the armed forces. I read the sad story of an American colonist who enrolled in the British army in 1740 one night after he had been drinking, was sent to Cuba, and there suddenly decided that he was after all a Quaker and could not fight. He was so badly whipped for refusing to carry arms that he died of his wounds. There were many such martyrs during the Civil War, and again during World War I. These were religious objectors, often simple young men, motivated entirely by a longing to feel at peace with God. But the results of their actions were political, establishing the legal principle of conscientious objection as it was practiced during World War II and further liberalized during the Vietnam War. It is a principle that has had a great impact on the peace movement worldwide.

In the same vein, the Quaker testimony against paying war taxes began with a few individuals who felt an opening and a "stop in my mind." Theirs was an even more difficult path than that of C.O.s, for the Society itself was not always behind them. Friends have always refused to pay purely military tithes, but when the taxes are "in the mixture," that is, war taxes and civilian taxes mixed together, or when the tax is not publicly stated as being for war, they have urged members to pay. In 1695, London Yearly Meeting disciplined a woman member who was advocating that Friends refuse to pay a new tax that she thought was clearly for war purposes. She was told that for the past 1600 years,

Christians have always paid their taxes. In this case the individual was trying to respond to the dictates of conscience (religion) while the group was concerned to prevent further persecution (politics). This uneasy balance continued for years, until today at last, monthly and yearly meetings are beginning to give more support for tax objectors, and some believe we will eventually have legal provision for the conscientious objection for our tax dollars as well as ourselves; a political result of a religious impulse.

The concept of actually trying to stop wars, instead of refusing to fight in them, did not take hold until the beginning of the 19th century, as one of several reform movements. The American Peace Society, made up of both Quakers and people of other denominations, worked to arrange international peace conferences and to call for arbitration of international disputes. While the motivation of this group was religious, the effort was political. Yet, when a much smaller group of Friends joined the New England Non-Resistance Society, a group dedicated to using nonviolence in the struggle for the abolition of slavery and later for the rights of women, they were accused of being too political. Lucretia Mott, the most prominent of these Friends, had to struggle to keep from being disowned by the Society of Friends. Lucretia Mott, in common with many other practical reformers, had no great openings, no overwhelming religious experiences. But she believed that the very urge within her to achieve peace and justice was a divine gift, and she found the path of a life of action leading to a deeper faith.

These examples could be repeated over and over in the lives of individual Quakers and in the development of testimonies. There have been many threads of Quaker thought since the days of George Fox and the Valiant Sixty. All of us—Evangelical Friends, the biblically oriented Friends, the social action Friends—can go back and claim historical precedent with equal justice. Henry Cadbury spent most

of his life pleading with Friends to accept differences. "Why must it be either/or? Why cannot it be both/and?" he asked.

As part of our faith in that of God in everyone, we must affirm that people are different, have different approaches to the Truth, and mean different things when they use the words *political* and *religious*. Several years ago all AFSC staff members were invited to take a psychological test called LIFO to help them to understand their own dominant character traits and to share and discuss them with colleagues so that they could understand why communication broke down between people with opposite traits. I have sometimes thought that the whole Society of Friends should take a variation of LIFO tests and try to understand that there are real differences in religious perceptions and religious experience, and that we must respect each other and help each other grow in the path that is right for us.

Henry Cadbury was one of the Friends to take part in the giant German child feeding program at the end of World War I. Today we tend to think of that program as a simple effort to meet human need. But, in fact, it had a peace education component. There was a real effort to use our experience abroad to influence U.S. public opinion at home toward a more compassionate attitude toward the Germans and a less vindictive treaty. Henry Cadbury's role was to work for AFSC Information Services, traveling and writing articles for U.S. newspapers and magazines.

In 1952 Henry Cadbury went back to visit a number of the child-feeding sites, among them Essen, to find out what traces were left of the effort made 30 years before, and to wonder what had been the results. Had not the children whom the AFSC fed grown up to be good Nazis, having learned nothing about the Peace Testimony that lay behind the Quaker effort to persuade people in the United States to love and forgive their former enemies and support the Quaker *speisung*?

But Henry Cadbury recalled that at the time of the child feeding there had been another U.S. group at work in Essen, a military group dismantling the notorious Krupp munitions works for conversion to peacetime use. "One group was attempting to disarm an industry, the other to disarm the human mind," he wrote. Did the rise of the Nazis prove that both the peacemakers and the warriors had failed?

The trouble, Henry Cadbury said, was that this was asking the wrong question. "Friends work depends not on the assurance of success, but on the assurance that it is our duty so to act," he said then and often. We can and should use all our intelligence, all our ability to look ahead, all our political savvy, if you will, in planning our programs, but we must know always that the end is not visible to us. Through the years it has been the means we have used—doing the right thing regardless of the consequences—for which we have been known in the world. It was this that earned the AFSC the Nobel Peace Prize. And it is this, Henry Cadbury believed, and I believe, too, that has made a difference in the world and constituted our most effective peace making. □

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