

# **IDENTITY, AUTHORITY, AND COMMUNITY**

**The Experience of Two Friends at  
the Woodbrooke Consultation on  
Identity, Authority and Community**

**Annis Bleeke and Carole Spencer**



### About the Authors:

Annis Bleeke represented North Pacific Yearly Meeting at the Consultation on Identity, Authority, & Community. A member of the Society of Friends for more than 30 years, she is from the liberal, unprogrammed branch of Quakerism and for more than 12 years has been actively involved in fostering connections among Friends of varying traditions. Recently retired from teaching, she is now serving as Associate Secretary of the Friends World Committee for Consultation, in the World Office in London.

Carole Spencer, one of three representatives to the consultation from the evangelical branch of Friends, is a member of Reedwood (Oregon) Friends Church and has been an active participant in Northwest Yearly Meeting for more than 15 years. She teaches church history and spirituality at Western Evangelical Seminary, a graduate school of George Fox University.

Corilda (Cilde) Grover moderated the presentation to Willamette Quarterly Meeting as well as attending the consultation. Cilde is also an evangelical Friend from Northwest Yearly Meeting. She has worked with Friends World Committee for Consultation in various capacities, and is now Executive Secretary of the office of the Section of the Americas in Philadelphia.

*Authors' comment:* We have no reason to know each other, no reason to come together to attempt to share our faith except the Quakerism we both claim. Yet, with others here in our corner of the United States, we do come together as participants in the ongoing women's groups, theology retreats, and conferences for Quaker women in the Pacific Northwest. We joined together to participate in the Consultation on Identity, Authority, & Community, which preceded the FWCC Triennial in Birmingham, England, in July 1997. On our return we were invited to report on the consultation to Willamette Quarterly Meeting. This essay grows out of our shared comments to that group. Our "conversation" was moderated by Cilde Grover and opened with background comments from Annis Bleeke.

*Annis Bleeke:* We come to Friends as individuals; we discover that spark of the Divine, the Inner Light, the Christ Within that leads us back again and again to meeting for worship in a particular Friends community, in a particular place, at a particular time. In coming to that community, we discover that we are not alone, that others share our experience; and we can find as a group that same spark of the Divine, those same leadings we experience as individuals. When we do this, we are open to questions of who we are, how we know we are "right," and what it means to live in a religious community with others of similar experience. These are questions of identity, authority, and community. I am not alone in wrestling with them. We in our local meetings, in Willamette Quarterly Meeting, in North Pacific Yearly Meeting, in North

America, and around the world are not alone. And so we come together to consider them in order to know ourselves, our history, our current practice, and each other.

*Cilde Grover*: As we prepared this presentation for Willamette Quarterly Meeting of North Pacific Yearly Meeting, we realized our area was the only place where this dialog could take place easily. The three members of Evangelical Friends International yearly meetings in the United States who took part in the consultation are members of Northwest Yearly Meeting. The two yearly meetings in the northwest part of the United States are diverse in belief and practice. A few of us have worked together since 1985 trying to facilitate dialog between the diverse groups.

The responses from yearly meetings and participation at the consultation were strongly skewed toward the liberal, unprogrammed meetings. In thinking about that, we are aware that most evangelical Friends find little need to discuss the topics of authority and identity because our books of *Faith and Practice* include strong statements that say where our authority comes from and what our identity is. What we found at the consultation, and what I have found in the Northwest and other travels, is that liberal Friends want to hear about identity and authority from evangelical Friends. I deeply regret that more evangelical Friends don't take part in opportunities such as the consultation— opportunities to share their personal faith and spiritual journeys.

What follows are Annis Bleeke's and Carole Spencer's responses about their personal experiences in their local meetings to the four areas considered at the consultation. Each section is preceded by an appropriate paragraph from the consultation epistle. Both authors served on the committee that drafted the epistle.

## IDENTITY

*Many Friends spoke of the need to describe more clearly who we are today, especially to inquirers, our children, and people of other faiths. Attempting to describe a reality which cannot be captured adequately in words, we have spoken of Quaker identity as a sacred community, a family, and a people of God shaped by our experience of the Spirit of Christ, of the Light Within. We share a desire to know more fully our Quaker, Christian, and biblical heritages and to see how such knowledge might bring us closer together.*

Annis Bleeke: One of the traditions at Woodbrooke is a worship session to close the day. On the evening of the first full day of the consultation, the worship committee planned this epilogue and asked each of us present to write a description of the Religious Society of Friends. My statement is still quite clear in my mind and true for me. My understanding of the identity of Quakers is that we are a people who recognize a Divine Power at work in the world, which can be known and can influence our behavior individually and corporately. We are of the Christian

tradition but know the Divine as more than any single entity. We believe the Lord God, Christ, the Inner Light speaks to and through us individually and corporately. In our worship we seek this contact with the Divine Source.

Those of us present recognized that this consultation was not fully representative of the Society of Friends worldwide. Yet, the statement in the epistle of the need to know who we are for our children and for newcomers transcends tradition and nationality as does the desire to know our multiple heritages.

Carole Spencer: I want to preface my remarks by being clear about my own biases and assumptions. I came to this conference as an evangelical who has had more contact, and I would add, deeply enriching contact, with non-evangelical Quakers than most of my co-religionists. Yet this was my first experience and exposure to dialog within the broadest spectrum of international Quakers. I wish simply to share my personal reflections on the Quaker tradition as it was represented by this gathering at Woodbrooke to which I was invited and welcomed. My perspective is that of an evangelical Quaker who desires to recover and reclaim the deeply transcendent spirituality at the heart of the original Quaker experience.

One participant summarized my initial response to the conference with the conclusion that Quakers have "many identities, many authorities, varying communities, and many approaches to Scripture." That, of course, says nothing new or different from what all of us already know about Quakers.

Everyone at the conference acknowledged that Quakerism has a strong, biblical, Christian heritage, but it seems that the identity of Quakers today is in something of a crisis as the tradition evolves away from its specifically Christian roots and becomes more pluralistic. Evangelical Quakers remain clear about the central Christian core of their identity, though they wrestle with many peripheral issues. Evangelical Quakers, though claiming to be non-creedal and non-confessional, do have written statements of faith that members affirm. As such, they draw identity boundaries, which most liberal Friends consider to be narrow and exclusive. All evangelical Friends are Christ-centered and accept the classically orthodox tradition of the Christian church but with a wide variety of expression within their various churches. As an evangelicai entering the wider world of Quakerdom, I find a very different place, a different culture. But it is a *religious* culture, and many of its members cultivate a deep interior life. I find a blending of all kinds of spiritual traditions, philosophies, and world views. The Quakerism represented by this gathering was highly individualist, syncretistic, eclectic, and diffuse. Individuals seem to shape the community, whereas among evangelicals, the community more often shapes the individual. In religious communities, identity comes from shared experiences and shared faith. Most of the voices at the consultation expressed a strong desire for a spiritual community where they can live out their Quaker testimonies and values. But unlike evangelical Quakers, the spiritual experience does not always have a faith content. The strongest element of shared faith

among the consultation participants seemed to be faith in the Quaker process of doing business. All had strong faith in the decisions and statements that come out of the sense of the meeting. A strong element of faith is placed in the process itself, which operates through a belief that a certain transcendent element enters into the Quaker way of doing business. Quaker business process has developed into a liturgical form in which the gathered community is connected to the divine mind.

I came to the conference with the assumption that liberal Quakerism has been slowly evolving away from its explicitly Christian roots. This assumption was challenged in part by the voices of participants who expressed a desire to return to a more traditional religious faith with more biblical and theological content. Other voices, however, confirmed my sense that liberal Quakerism desires to rid itself of traditional Christian language and content, which it sees as a barrier to community. As an evangelical in the midst of this dialectic of voices, I found it difficult to speak truly from the heart of my faith when language and symbols that express it are alternately reclaimed by some and repudiated by others. To be religious in an explicitly Christian way is not easy within the broader spectrum of Friends. It is hard to feel an integral part of a community on good feelings and good intentions alone without a shared language of faith. I personally need religious language and symbols to express my faith. I understand all language is metaphor, but the metaphors that speak to me are those of the Bible, which have been appropriated by



spiritual guides and Christian mystics and have endured through the centuries. They are words and symbols that have taken on transcendent meaning for me. As Quakers we all acknowledge our Christian heritage. If it is viewed as merely a historical footnote or a social construct, what meaning or power can it possibly have for religious seekers of truth among us? Do we simply create an individualist, expressive spirituality of pure experience with no connecting links to a central tradition? What basis do we have to evaluate spirituality and discern truth? Why is a crystal ball any less certain than the Bible for guidance?

I share with others at the consultation the worry that the image of Quakerism is eroding because the tradition on which it is based is no longer central. What then do we pass on to the next generation?

## SCRIPTURE

*The importance and use of the Bible in our personal and corporate lives varies widely. Some see it as authoritative, some find it a precious resource, and some are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with it. Many Friends wish they knew the Bible better, and some that Friends generally did so.*

Carole Spencer: Scripture is a mixed bag for most of us. Evangelicals puzzle over Scripture and wish they knew (understood) it better, just as liberals do, though they are more willing to appropriate it by a leap of faith as they read it devotionally. As an

evangelical, I fully believe in a divine presence in Scripture. Scripture reveals God and inspires and guides. It is a divine and human document. For Fox and the early Quakers, the Bible shaped their faith and provided a language for their spiritual experiences. They shared the biblical world view and claimed it as the divine Word, but they did not idolize the Bible. Yet early Quakers claimed reason and experience would never contradict Scripture. They could say it and mean it because they shared the biblical world view. Almost 2,000 years of historical distance separates us from the primitive biblical world, so it is no wonder the Bible is so puzzling. Many evangelical Quakers admit that the Bible is a human document as well as a divine one and are willing to apply some of the biblical criticism of the past 200 years in our understanding of its meaning. In our awareness that the biblical writers were fallible human beings writing within their social-cultural context, we are less loathe to admit they had misconceptions about some things, such as the nature of the universe, acceptance of patriarchy, and the institution of slavery. God reveals Godself to us through limited, earth-bound vessels — our minds, our thoughts, our language, our rituals, our gathered community, and the sacred text of our Christian tradition, the Bible. The Bible is a part of our tradition, the broad Christian tradition as well as the Quaker tradition. In a real sense, the Bible and tradition are one and the same. The communal decisions of the early church created the canon, the writings we call the Bible. Tradition is the reading, wrestling, and interpreting of Scripture over time through the lens of our culture. When the early

Quakers read the Bible for themselves they recognized that the church through the centuries had gotten some things wrong. That is what reformation and renewal are all about: allowing the Spirit to reinterpret the Bible anew. As Quakers, we have our own favorite texts and interpretations that have shaped our tradition, theology, and spirituality in unique ways, whether we are aware of them or not.

All Quakers would probably agree that Scripture is powerfully subjective. It contains truth in a metaphorical, symbolic way. It is story and poetry rather than doctrine. Like story and poetry, it speaks truth to the individual on many different levels. I don't read Scripture to learn doctrine. I don't read it to find answers to every question. I read it to find God, and I can testify along with many clouds of witnesses to encountering God in the experience of reading and meditating on biblical texts.

Annis Bleeker. I was a representative to this consultation, appointed at my request by my yearly meeting. When speaking of identity, authority, and community, I felt on relatively firm ground, personally and for the mainstream in our yearly meeting. But in speaking about Friends' use of the Bible for devotion, in decision-making, as authoritative or not, as a help or hindrance in interactions with those of other faiths or Friends of other traditions and what it all may mean, I have no firm ground.

Personally, I have studied Old and New Testament in an academic setting; I have read the Gospels with a Bible commentary at my side; I have friends who are

teachers and interpreters of Old and New Testament; I even led a Bible study series at my meeting using a structured curriculum; and I remain in confusion. I cannot easily quote from the Bible; I struggle with interpreting many of the Old and New Testament stories and often do not remember them accurately.

My statements are not unrepresentative of other Friends in North Pacific Yearly Meeting. They are a real cause for distress for some who also bear the name of Friends. The carefully crafted words of the epistle read: "Many Friends wish they knew the Bible better . . . "—That's me!—" . . . and some that Friends generally did so." Those "some" draw inspiration and comfort from Bible teachings; it is that inspiration and comfort they wish for those of us who do not.

## AUTHORITY

*Authority is difficult for Friends. Though given different emphases by various groups of Friends, the Bible, the Inner Light, Christ Within, the Holy Spirit, group discernment and Quaker tradition and testimonies all constitute sources of authority for us today.*

Annis Bleeker. My education among Friends happened locally, in Multnomah Monthly Meeting, in Willamette Quarterly meeting, and in North Pacific Yearly Meeting. What I know, I began to know among the Friends in these meetings. This is some of what I know from being among them.

When we address the source or sources of authority for Friends, whether individually or corporately, the

secular world's individualism and privatization of life invade our community. Is "consensus" what we do? How is "sense of the Meeting" different from that? How do we avoid the dangers described in the past as "ranterism" and still allow all voices to be heard? Why isn't it enough that I am led to do something? These are questions we wrestle with.

When I spoke of identity, I could fall back on words I wrote at the consultation, with a heightened focus on the task at hand, in an intense, spiritual atmosphere of inquiry. Regarding sources of authority, I can now say that the authority under which we live and act is primarily that of the Light of Christ Within, known individually and corporately. Our divine leadings become known in worship and are tested in the group discernment of the meeting for worship for business, or a clearness committee. When they are confirmed in our community, by Scripture and by the experience of Friends who came before us, we are on firm ground. When this is not true, we bear a special burden to return to our divine source and the discernment of the group for further discernment. Ultimately the "rightness" of leadings is known in hindsight by their fruits.

Yet other questions remain for me as I suspect they do for many others. I am told there are Friends who KNOW where authority lies — ask them and they will tell you. A part of me envies their stated certainty; my experience causes me to question it.

Carole Spencer: Authority is composed of sources that aid us in discovering or knowing truth. How do we know that we know? How do we know that what

we know is true? How do we know that the core of our belief system is in fact truth? In today's post-modern world where all reality is viewed as a human or social construct, the whole question of authority becomes meaningless. Authority is not only difficult for Friends, it's difficult for all people in the late 20th century. We have no solid ground to stand on; all sources of authority are questioned as merely human perceptions. However, if we have faith that a transcendent reality exists beyond the sensory world and breaks into our world, then we can begin to consider ways in which that reality, force, or spirit might reveal itself. We can only begin to think about authority if we believe in an ultimate truth that can be known.

Despite my own angst and occasional bouts of doubt, I have always found it helpful to look at one of the classical methodologies of determining truth — what is known among Wesleyan theologians as the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral." It offers four sources of authority, which interact with each other: experience, tradition, reason, and Scriptures. I ask myself, what is revealed in Scripture? What has the whole sweep of the Christian church thought about? What have I personally experienced and what is the experience of my community? And lastly, what does my reason confirm about it? We could easily call it the "Barclayan Quadrilateral," as it is the same classical method used by the Quaker theologian Robert Barclay.

For Quakers, experience has always been primary but never autonomous. The experience of early Quakers was immersed in the Scripture, shaped by the

Christian tradition, and confirmed by human reason. Today, neither the Bible nor tradition has much appeal as a source of authority for many Quakers. But experience by itself can be confusing if it is not attached to some guide or framework in which to interpret it. Experience by itself is not a reliable guide. Even collective experience is not always reliable. How do we know when we are being led astray or embracing falsehood or new idolatries? I believe that Quakers are right to emphasize experience. In fact, in all honesty, everyone starts with experience in the search for truth — it's the human way. It is always the starting point, but I'm doubtful it can be the ending point. Pure experience without any kind of theological framework can easily become spiritual narcissism. Experience must be interpreted, and Scripture and the collected wisdom of the past, as well as the collected wisdom of our present community (which includes written documents of *Faith and Practice*) help give us words for our experience and point us to the truth that we can't fully see.

## COMMUNITY

*In speaking about community, we realized that we had come full circle. Community encompasses our identity, our attitude toward and use of scripture, and our understanding of authority. Community has both a physical and spiritual dimension. In a worldwide context, many of us recognize and appreciate a sense of kinship among the groups of Friends gathered here. We also heard the pain of Friends whose communities*

*have been shattered by war and of those who live in isolation without a local Friends community.*

Carole Spencer: All of us who gathered at Woodbrooke came with a strong sense of living in a fragmented world, within a landscape that is continually slipping beneath our feet. Religion and community used to provide the integration in our lives and the solid grounding and security we all crave. Many people now feel they must integrate from within and create their own meaning. Yet the desire to connect with others and to belong to a community seemed especially intense among the Friends gathered at Woodbrooke. My experience at the consultation confirmed to me that Quakerism is a religion of intense, shared feelings. This has always been true for evangelicals, but I was surprised to find it as true among liberal Friends. Of course, the feelings shared are often very different. I also sensed some nostalgia for a Quaker community more God-oriented than some of the monthly meetings from which participants came, even though no one would want to return to an outmoded past. Some participants at the conference expressed a deep sense of being a gathered community. Others felt we groped for community and didn't quite succeed. In the midst of all our talking and sharing, our words often lacked a depth of communication and sense of real understanding. We were reluctant to speak of what really bothers us, what really divides us. We try so hard to find commonality that we sweep our differences under the table.

Vast cultural and theological differences separated the participants at the Woodbrooke gathering. Evangelicals and liberals, for example, do not really



speaking the same language. It was noted that most unprogrammed Friends have only a dim awareness of evangelicals. The two branches come together with different goals and priorities, in addition to their very different spiritualities. Someone said that for a liberal Quaker, God is a mystery beyond words, and for an evangelical, the way to experience God is through words. I personally find both to be true.

In the worship groups, we kindly and gently pressured people to share. As much as Quakers love silence, we also seem to crave words; we want everyone to speak. Great pressure was placed on the few evangelicals in attendance to speak from their hearts. As an evangelical, I found it difficult to feel enough trust amidst such a diverse group to speak of what really matters spiritually. I feared giving offense to those who cannot tolerate traditional religious language. I also felt that if someone truly spoke the pain of their heart, it might shatter the veneer of the community we had created.

Community is our deepest desire and longing, yet the reality of a true community of unity in diversity is incredibly difficult to sustain.

Annis Bleeke. Ideally, our Friends meetings are covenant communities. In Scripture, covenant refers to a relationship of abiding trust and fidelity with God. So in a covenant community, we are first called into a relationship with God. It is God who gives us to one another and to the community. Our relationship with others is divinely mediated. Our relationship with God changes us, changes the way we

live, gives us a new order to our lives, and we cannot live that new social pattern alone.

In the secular world, we choose to be there with those people. To a large degree, we have the luxury of choice. Many of us can pick up and go elsewhere if we choose. Picking up and leaving the Society of Friends is really not an option, not if we are to remain faithful in our relationship to the God who led us here in the first place.

Where is here? In my experience, it is wherever I am among Friends. It is where all that we may say and feel and actually do with regard to identity, authority, and scripture is tested and acted out. It is because we cannot live alone that new social pattern, those divinely mediated relationships, that we came together as a worldwide community of Friends in Birmingham.



### **About the Wider Quaker Fellowship**

Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas, works to facilitate loving understanding of diversities among Friends while we discover together, with God's help, our common spiritual ground, and to facilitate full expression of our Friends' testimonies in the world. Friends World Committee's Wider Quaker Fellowship program is a ministry of literature. Through our mailings of readings, we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

### **About This Pamphlet**

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