

Swarthmore College

Works

Religion Faculty Works

Religion

12-26-2012

Quakers, Culture, And The Transforming Power Of Love

Ellen M. Ross

Swarthmore College, eross1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ellen M. Ross. (2012). "Quakers, Culture, And The Transforming Power Of Love". *Friends Journal*.
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion/159>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Quakers, Culture, and the Transforming Power of Love

 friendsjournal.org/quakers-culture-and-the-transforming-power-of-love

December 26, 2012

December 26, 2012

By Ellen M. Ross

A THEME OF REDEMPTIVE VIOLENCE pervades the American public consciousness. It is visible in the rhetoric surrounding the U.S. presence in Iraq, in popular films, and even in commonly cited biblical stories such as David and Goliath. We are not the unprovoked aggressors in these accounts. Our common narratives assume that violence is inevitable. Although often engaged in with reluctance, violence is depicted as unavoidable, and, more often than not, as salvific.

U.S. cultural assumptions are bound up with our country's martial history, from the arrival of settlers from Europe and England in the 1600s to today's wars. The nearly unquestioned, underlying message is that military conflict is an inevitable, unavoidable, and "natural" part of the American story.

Our history does provide alternative narratives to these popular myths. These counter-testimonies include Quaker peace traditions. Friends informed the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, in the person of the Quaker civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, who was a close advisor to King. As we learn this rich and varied history, our understanding of human nature expands and we can question the ideals of violence.

Edward Coxere: Concerning Fighting or Killing of Enemies



Willem van de Velde the Younger (circa 1672).
sailingwarships.com

The biblical injunctions of Matthew 5:43-44—to love one's neighbor and to love one's enemies stand at the center of the lives of Quaker peacemakers from the seventeenth century to the present. Edward Coxere (1633-1694) was a bold and fearless fighter on British

warships and trade ships maintained and fired guns and cannons. In the mid-1670s, he witnessed a debate among two Quakers and an Anglican priest:

The Lord . . . followed me that very day, and brought not peace, but trouble; for the first remarkable opening I had before I slept . . . was concerning fighting or killing of enemies. The questioning of the lawfulness or unlawfulness of it lay on me as a very great burden, because it struck at my very life.

Indeed it did: Coxere's livelihood as a gunner on warships and trade ships lay in the killing and destroying of lives and property. He describes his own progress in thought: "I did not lay down fighting on other men's words, but the Lord taught me to love my enemies in His own time. This work was not done at once."

The injunction to love his enemies brought Coxere trouble; he had to face the wrath of his captain and his shipmates as he negotiated life on a warship as a gunner who no longer could carry out his work. Another Quaker gunner told him that, in battle, Quakers could fire at the mast so they would not have to shed blood, but Coxere rejected this as too feeble a way of living by the biblical injunction. This fighting sailor turned peaceable Christian finally abandoned all financial security as he came to believe that "my employment must be laid down, in which I had the opportunity to get money." This was a challenge, because it was difficult to find work to support his family.

While many, then and now, describe this "enemy love" injunction as morality taken to the extreme, for Coxere and other Quakers, Jesus's love commandment formed the moral and spiritual foundation for their entire existence. That commandment necessitated a radical reorientation in lives devoted to the consistent practice of nonviolence.

Joseph Ritter: Light Against Darkness



Via National Archives.

Quaker texts advocating nonviolence express the awareness that suffering and death are possible and even, at times, likely outcomes of the prophetic opposition to war and violence. Early Quakers were moved to tell judges and tax collectors not to oppress the poor; they

refused to remove their hats as a sign of respect, they opposed the death penalty, and they resisted taking up arms on behalf of the king. They were beaten and imprisoned; they lost property, social prestige, and income because they advocated for the poor and refused to participate in the social hierarchies of their time.

Drawing on battle imagery in the Book of Revelation, Quakers envisioned their struggle as the Lamb's War—all-out war indeed, but fought on the spiritual, not the physical plane. Scripture testifies that Jesus Christ, the Lamb, will be victorious, and followers of Jesus threw themselves into the agonistic struggle to realize the kingdom of God on earth. This struggle of light against darkness was a cosmic struggle, a struggle at the very heart of existence.

The only way to defeat darkness was to cultivate the light of Christ within, the Inward Teacher, as early Friends put it. Theirs was a prophetic endeavor to transform the world by daring to live as if the realm of God had been realized.

Moral conviction awakened in Quakers fierce and unshakeable courage. As the late-eighteenth century surveyor, minister, and reformer Elias Hicks put it, "But those who do the commandments of God, are as bold as a lion; and nothing on earth—not all the powers of men and devils—can make them tremble or fear."

In the midst of the 1777 Battle of Brandywine, the continental soldier Joseph Ritter became convinced that it was contrary to God's will for Christians to fight. Ritter's world was turned upside down by what he experienced as God's call to love all people. It was not his soldierly fighting that stirred his deepest passions; rather, it was after his "convincement" (as Quakers call it) that he experienced extraordinary courage:

The love of God was shed abroad in my heart, and all fear of man was entirely taken away; and throughout the engagement I remained perfectly calm, though the bombshells and shot fell round me like hail, cutting down my comrades on every side, and tearing off the limbs of trees like a whirlwind; and the very roots quaked, and the hills that surrounded us seemed to tremble with the roar of the cannon.

For Ritter, as for many others, learning to love his enemies did not happen immediately. Ritter was seized as a prisoner-of-war by the Hessians, and imprisoned in terrible conditions with inadequate food and clothing; some of the prisoners starved to death, and all suffered terribly. Although Ritter refused to kill from the time immediately after his convincement, he narrates that it was years before he could overcome his feelings of revenge toward his captors:

The Christian principle in my own breast had entirely overcome that spirit of war and revenge, which had so long troubled me, even in meetings; and I was enabled to forgive my enemies, even those who had so greatly abused me while I was a prisoner wholly in their power, and unable to defend myself. Yes! I forgave them from my very heart, loved them freely and could have received them as brothers.

Anthony Benezet: If We are Moved with Compassion



Anthony Benezet. Via Friends Journal files.

In eighteenth-century Quakerism, a second biblical precept begins to guide the peace-centered reform movements: “Do unto others, as you would have others do unto you.” This was read by the prophetic members of the Society of Friends as God’s affirmation of “equal regard for all [humankind],” and it became the rallying cry for their opposition to slavery and affirmation of the rights of Native Americans.

Philadelphia Quaker reformer, schoolteacher, and abolitionist Anthony Benezet (1713-1784) sought a nonviolent solution to the colonies’ dispute with England and published pamphlets urging the cause of peace. Throughout all of his works on war and peace, Benezet’s founding commandment is the biblical injunction to love one’s enemies. For Benezet, enemy love is diametrically opposed to the conditions of war:

War requires of its votaries that they kill, destroy, lay waste, and to the utmost of their power distress and annoy, and in every way and manner deprive those they esteem their enemies of support and comfort. Now reader, consider the difference; look at the suffering and distress which has, and continues to desolate this once highly favoured land; numbers of human beings, equally with our selves the objects of redeeming grace, are daily hurried into eternity, many, its to be feared, in an unprepared state.

Anthony Benezet taught African Americans for twenty years in his home, and persuaded the Society of Friends to establish a school for black and Native American children. He also organized education for white girls and poor children. His 1762 treatise against slavery was foundational for the work of many abolitionists, including Thomas Clarkson and Methodist founder John Wesley.

Benezet's practice of nonviolence developed through a process of cultivating compassion, the virtue he considered essential for human transformation: "If we are moved with compassion toward our fellow-men, let us cherish this sensation; it is a call from the God of Love . . . God is Love—and he that dwelleth in God dwelleth in love and God in him." Humans can cherish and nurture compassion or they can ignore and eventually silence it. In his treatise against slavery Benezet asks what greater calamity can befall humanity than "to become prey to hardness of heart."

This focus on compassion as the key to transformation assumes that evil is not something external to humans "such as can be struck and smashed It is within [humans], and cannot be cast out by inflicting pain or death on [the] body Weapons and war are therefore not really relevant to the solution of the actual problem of evil." This perspective not only assumes that the heart of the believer can be changed, but also shows a confidence in the possibility of transforming the heart of the enemy. This theology is manifest in the way of life of those who seek to live out a response to evil in this world.

Bayard Rustin: Courage in the Face of Danger



Bayard Rustin (left). Via Wikimedia Commons.

Bayard Rustin was a twentieth-century Quaker civil rights leader and advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr. In a 1943 letter to the U.S. Draft Board, he spoke from this spiritual tradition when he wrote:

The Conscription Act denied brotherhood—the most basic New Testament teaching. Its design and purpose is to set men apart—German against American, American against Japanese. Its aim springs from a moral impossibility—that ends justify means, that from unfriendly acts a new and friendly world can emerge . . . Segregation, separation, according to Jesus, is the basis of continuous violence. That which separates man from his brother is evil and must be resisted.

Until recently Rustin's role in the civil rights movement has been obscured because he was an openly gay black man in the America of the 1950s and 1960s. A brilliant peace activist, a key voice in introducing nonviolence into the civil rights movement, and the pivotal organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, Rustin attributed his activism in part to his Quaker upbringing and to the influence of his Quaker grandparents.

In 1957, Bayard Rustin assumed a guiding role in meetings leading to the formation of the Southern Negro Leaders Conference on Nonviolent Integration. He believed that the final organizational gathering of January 11 1957, could “go down in history as one of the most important meetings to have taken place in the United States.” It was here that the twin platforms of the civil rights movement—freedom and nonviolence—were agreed upon. “We call upon them [the Negro people] to accept Christian love in full knowledge of its power to defy evil . . . Nonviolence is not a symbol of weakness or cowardice, but, as Jesus and Gandhi demonstrated, nonviolence resistance transforms weakness into strength and breeds courage in the face of danger.” For Rustin, the commitment to nonviolent change as the path to social equality showed the way to addressing the economic injustices of society and the deep moral crisis of the United States.

Rustin was one of the authors of 1955's *Speak Truth to Power*, one of the key texts of the civil rights movement. Published by the American Friends Service Committee, it said: “The early Friends realized only too clearly that the Kingdom of God had not come, but they had an inward sense that it would never come until somebody believed in its principles enough to try them in actual operation. They resolved to go forward then, and make the experimental trial, and take the consequences. So we believe and so we advise.”

Unshakeable Voices

We often overlook the extraordinary courage that marks the lives of people who stand apart from the dominant culture's endorsement of violence as a means of achieving the “good” longed for by so many. Courage is at the core of these people's prophetic willingness to create a world of peace, and enables them to do the seemingly impossible, aware that suffering and even death may be likely outcomes of their roles in the cosmic struggle of good against evil.

In my research, I frequently encounter the seeming simplicity of the implacable commitments that lead believers to challenge the status quo in order to advocate on behalf of the oppressed, the poor and the hungry, and to protest against systemic oppression perpetrated

by war, slavery, and greed. For many Christians, the history of war stands in contradiction with fundamental divine commandments: *Thou shalt not kill. Love your enemies. Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.* History is a witness to how often these deceptively simple aphorisms are ignored, forgotten, dismissed as naïve, or overshadowed by a battery of detailed objections.

And yet, I am struck again and again by the radical action, courage, and creativity of those who set their sights on living in concert with these foundational affirmations. Sometimes these guidelines orient people's lives in a seamless journey of unwavering and tranquil consistency; at times they uproot and then reset people's lives; and even at times, as in the civil rights movement, the courage to live these convictions brings about ground-shaking social transformation.

When people live in accord with these words, they open a world rich in consequence, strategy, and transformation. Their adherents are freed from the constraints of social custom to find alternatives to the dominant values of our culture and to re-envision a world that respects all life. So the seventeenth century Edward Coxere began to think about the divine commandment not to kill. Two years later, he had given up his job and livelihood and was searching for another way to support himself and his family. Bayard Rustin's commitment to the commandment to "love your enemies," led him to become a conscientious objector during World War II, and then to become a leading voice in the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Three hundred years of Quaker history offer consolation to those who find themselves questioning the assumptions of our popular culture: we are not alone in our convictions, our doubts and fears, our protest and our lament. The voices of those who have lived with unshakeable confidence in the power of love to transform the heart of the self and the enemy may challenge us by inviting us to live lives that reconcile belief and action. The narrative of the transforming power of love that emerges in their stories offers a visionary alternative to the myth of redemptive violence that is so prevalent in our culture.



Ellen M. Ross, president of Friends Historical Association, is associate professor and chair of religion, and member of the peace and conflict studies committee at Swarthmore College. She is a member of Swarthmore (Pa.) Meeting.