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A Century of Liberal Quakerism

FGC GATHERING SUNDAY EVENING EVENING PLENARY

by J. William Frost

Saturday evening ritual in our household is listening to PBS's "Prairie Home Companion," featuring Garrison Keillor. Not everyone appreciates hearing about Lake Wobegon. My son, for example, insists that Keillor is the Lawrence Welk for ex-Midwesterners of a certain age. I don't tell him that as a child I liked Lawrence Welk or remind him that so did he, when as a grade-schooler he visited his grandmother. On the April 1 program, Keillor's monolog featured Constable Leroy. Leroy attended the Lutheran Lenten service, which had an interval of five minutes for silent meditation, a period that seemed to Leroy to last forever.

The constable had trouble with silence because he believed he knew what his neighbors should be thinking, which was not what they were actually thinking, and they were thinking about him. So Leroy did not appreciate silent meditation. Yet in the course of five minutes, Leroy came to realize that he could not sell his snowmobile for $750--$75 was a more realistic figure—and that he could not use the proceeds to go visit his cousin in Newark, N.J., and become a famous songwriter. In five minutes, Leroy attained a modicum of self-understanding, Quakers would say that this was a profitable silent meeting.

The historian is more constrained than the storyteller, for, unlike Keillor, he or she cannot dictate what characters say or do during silence. When I attend meeting, I cannot be certain what my neighbors are contemplating or what they should be contemplating, or even if they are meditating with closed eyes rather than fighting sleep. The implications for a historian are stark, for the meeting for worship, the central ritual of the Religious Society of Friends, that which allows us to endure over time, is off-limits because we have no liturgy, no surviving written sermons. (There are a few surviving sermons for earlier centuries that were taken down in dictation by non-Friends). The process of a successful meeting for worship is mysterious even to the participants. So the historian of liberal Quakerism, that group which comprises the membership of FGC, must describe the contents of the faith by secondary ways, always remembering that the visible reflects and distorts the invisible.

A second difficulty in assessing 20th-century Quakerism is that we are just starting to write its history. We now have a few books on the period before 1960, but for the last third of our century it is still impossible to separate the forest from the trees, and your and my personal experiences elucidate as well as camouflage understanding of what is significant in the enormous paper trail we are leaving. So this, in a sense, is the first draft for that history. Fortunately, there are many who will be able to test what I say by memory, and I hope that you will inform me of the strengths and weaknesses in my presentation because it is easier to correct errors before they become established. After all, history does not repeat itself, but historians often repeat each other.

My purpose is not just accurate description of the past but to crack the historical coconut for relevant juice, and we all know that Quakers are a rather "tough nut to crack." There is ample Quaker precedent for my kind of enterprise, beginning with George Fox's selective history in his journals, in William Penn's preface to the published version, termed "Rise and Progress of the People called Quakers," and in Rufus Jones's locating the origins of Quakers in spiritualists rather than English Puritans in the magisterial five volumes of the Rowntree series of Quaker history published at the beginning of the 20th century. So I am continuing a long tradition of using historical evidence for didactic purposes, to derive lessons from examining a few trends of the last 100 years of liberal Quaker history.

The birth of FGC in 1900 came at the same time as a new theological synthesis, sometimes termed liberalism or modernism—and I am using these terms in a religious context separate from any political connotations. The appearance of John W. Graham, a London Friend, as keynote speaker at our first meeting symbolized a new era. Since the 1827 schism London Friends had looked at Hicksites as an embarrassment, people who were not really Christians or even Quakers. Unfortunately from the English perspective, the Hicksites had not died out, and they remained the majority in Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore Yearly Meetings. By 1900, for a group of modernist reformers of London Yearly Meeting, evangelicalism—now identified with revivalism, the pastoral system, and the Richmond Declaration of Faith of Five Years Meeting—seemed suspect, a simplification of Quakerism and Christianity. Hicksites, even in the 1830s, had been unhappy with an emphasis upon strict doctrinal formulations on the nature of the Trinity and atonement as tests for membership, and before the Civil War, under the influence of Lucretia Mott, had flirted with Unitarianism/transcendentalism. London liberals judged right, for by 1900 FGC was ready to repudiate the last vestiges of quiescence and embrace modernism.

Throughout the 20th century, modernism has permeated FGC Quakerism, becoming so dominant a motif that we forget that it was a revolutionary reinterpretation of Quakerism. Still, among Hicksites in 1900 few complained, because modernism seemed so compatible with their understandings of Quaker traditions. Both emphasized the primacy of religious experience, treated doctrinal statements as symbolic utterances rather than literal truth, saw the Bible as a product of

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history rather than eternal truth, stressed a loving rather than a judging God, and emphasized New Testament ethics. Jesus became a supreme ethical exemplar and the Sermon on the Mount a guide for reconstructing the general society. Liberals were optimistic, believing in the possibility of creating the Kingdom of God on earth. God was immanent in the creation and revealed his personality through nature, poetry, music, and familial love.

Liberalism or modernism offered Hicksites and some Orthodox (the non-holiness, silent-meeting group centered on the East coast) an escape from what both branches saw as the sterile controversies of the 19th century and linked Quakerism to the best in contemporary thought. It also offered a way to affirm the values of both religion and science. Liberalism's emphasis upon religious experience meant that Friends would not have to worry about Darwin or higher criticism of the Bible. Freud was still beyond the pale, but William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* showed the compatibility of psychology and religious commitment. Liberalism allowed Friends, who were increasingly desirous of attending college, with a clear conscience to read novels, attend plays and concerts, and participate in the intellectual and political life of the nation. They would no longer be estranged from the influential minority of fellow liberals in the Methodist, Baptist, or Congregational churches, and all Protestants would work together in a movement termed the Social Gospel to regulate big business, enfranchise women, create world peace, and legislate prohibition.

Modernism, in short, seemed to emancipate Friends from the past schisms, allowed them to link their actions with those of the first generation of Friends, and legitimated social action. And it accomplished all this by rethinking the history of Friends. George Fox, allegedly the first liberal, espoused a positive view of humankind, downplayed creeds, emphasized an unmediated experience of God, and sought to revolutionize Puritan England. Early Friends practiced, in Howard Brinton's phrase, an "ethical mysticism," and so should we.

Liberalism had a cost, however, and it involved a repudiation of much of what had earlier defined Hicksites (and the Orthodox as well). From 1700 until the 1870s American Friends had insisted upon a sectarian way of life; they used the terms "guarded" and "a garden enclosed" as reminders to keep Friends distinct from others. They had emphasized the truthfulness of Scripture and the divinity of Christ, worried about Quakers being corrupted by involvement with outsiders in benevolent associations or politics, and made arduous and time-consuming the process of becoming a member. Quietist Friends, who had been a majority of both Hickite and Orthodox before the Civil War, emphasized that a minister was a person set aside because he or she was a spokesperson for God. Intellectual attainment could be a liability in the ministry, but being steeped in the minutiae of the Bible was a first requisite. Liberalism jettisoned sectarian Quakerism and joined Friends to mainstream American culture at the risk of having members accept its values, of
being conformed while trying to transform the world.

Modernism was a movement of intellectuals whose leaders came from two sources: British Friends, who were often teachers like Graham, A. Neave Brayshaw, and Rendell Harris; and college professors in America. The chief FGC popularizer of modernism was Swarthmore College's Jesse Holmes, a man trained in science who became a philosopher and who regularly wrote for Friends Intelligencer, the main Hicksite periodical, and spoke at FGC conferences. Jane Rushmore, for many years one of two paid employees of FGC, translated liberalism into Sunday school literature. For reasons that I have not yet figured out, however, the major American Quaker liberal authors all came from evangelical homes: Rufus Jones, Thomas Kelly, Howard Brinton, Douglas Steere, Elbert Russell, Henry Cadbury, and even the social activists like Clarence Pickett of AFSC and E. Raymond Wilson of FCNL.

Quakers had long had a bias against paying religious leaders, but liberalism, like evangelicalism, weakened this testimony. In the Midwest a pastoral system emerged for preachers who devoted full time to Quaker concerns. Liberal Friends kept silent meetings; however, professional Quakers emerged in departments of philosophy in Quaker colleges, as paid staff in Quaker organizations, in FGC, in AFSC in 1917, in FCNL founded in 1943, in Friends World Committee for Consultation (1936), and in the bureaucracies of yearly meetings. In essence, the AFSC worker was like the Quaker missionary; college teachers like Holmes, Jones, Kelly, Pickett, and Steere—even when they claimed to be philosophers—were also pastors for students and individual Friends. All the Quaker professionals saw their occupations as religious vocations, a spiritual calling.

Modernist theology allowed the 1827 schism to end. The old disputes were really about words, and words used by theologians were only symbols pointing to religious experience. An historical approach to studying the Bible and the modern "scientific" approach to theology made the old issues irrelevant. Eastern Gurneyites, Wilburites, and Hicksites could begin to socialize with each other in athletic contests, Young Friends organizations, American Friends Service Committee, Pendle Hill, and then in joint yearly meeting committees. First, individual meetings, then selected yearly meeting committees, and then yearly meetings united in New York, New England, Philadelphia, and finally Baltimore Yearly Meeting. By 1968 the eastern schism was over, with New York and New England Yearly Meetings belonging to both Friends United Meeting and FGC; Philadelphia remained only a part of FGC but joined the National Council of Churches while FGC itself joined the World Council of Churches. British liberals, blaming themselves for helping to cause the split, also worked for reunification, and the links between FGC meetings and London Yearly Meeting remained strong.

Since there was such a strong academic flavor to liberalism, new meetings flourished in towns where there were college campuses. And educated people joined Friends. For many liberals, membership seemed less important than attendance at meetings. The Wider Quaker Fellowship sought to link those who were attracted to Quaker teachings, worship practices, or testimonies without becoming members. So liberalism again eroded the distinction between those who were Friends and outsiders and made it more difficult to preserve a distinctive Quaker culture.

Liberalism weakened the contacts and created estrangement between evangelical and fundamentalist Friends and modernist Friends. FGC members were also cut off from the Friends churches established in Africa, the Caribbean, and Alaska. A keynote in the 20th-century history of American Protestants is the animosity between those who ask, "Have you been saved?" and those who don't consider the question important. For example, the most recent edition of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's Faith and Practice uses the terms sin and grace only once and does not include the words salvation and atonement, even in the almost 100 pages of quotations. This is not only a distorted view of Quaker traditions but it seems as if Philadelphia Yearly Meeting were consciously waving a red flag at non-FGC Quakers and other Christians.

Both liberal and fundamentalist
Friends—who each insist that they are authentically Quaker and quote George Fox to prove it—show more willingness to learn from outsiders, Buddhists and psychologists for FGC and Southern Baptists for the evangelicals, than their Quaker kin. In essence, we remain feuding and not kissing cousins. Silent meeting Friends are a minority of Quakers, and our Peace Testimony requires that we welcome dialog with those who differ from us even on fundamentals. We cannot hope to have a constructive relation with the worldwide Quaker movement if we cut ourselves off from its language and concerns. After all, a basic tenet of liberalism stressed in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting’s *Faith and Practice* is to be open to alternative perspectives and the virtues of diversity.

Immediately after reunification, there was an attempt by liberal Quakers to reach out to Mid- and Far Western evangelicals and fundamentalists. The initiatives came from both sides. This movement reached its perigee in the Wichita conference of 1977, but the emergence of homosexuality as an issue has deepened the division in recent years.

Liberalism transformed the meeting for worship by changing the definition of the ministry and weakening the authority of yearly meetings. From 1700 until the 20th century, a minister spoke for God. The minister was a person set aside, recognized by the meeting as someone special, and there were special queries for ministers and elders whose responsibility was the maintenance of truth. Before 1930, among Hicksites select meetings for ministers and elders became worship and counsel; ministers were no longer recognized and recorded. (For the Orthodox, the change came only in the 1950s.) In theory, modern Friends abolished the laity instead of the ministry; in practice, all became laity because liberal Friends disliked authority, particularly religious authority.

The practice of ministry became easier. No longer was a deep inward search required, a feeling for truth. Rather a person could begin ministry by referring to an article in the *New York Times,* and weighty Friends worried that worship could become a discussion group. Conversely, others disliked any spoken ministry and replaced the concept “silent” (or unprogrammed)—which had no relationship to the amount of speaking—with quiet or silence—which meant no speaking. Instead of proclaiming a specific gospel, ministry became a sharing of a search for truth.

Eventually some Friends used liberalism in order to repudiate the Christian mythos or reinterpreted Christianity in order to make it only a part of a cosmic spiritualism, a feeling of oneness with the world. Note that this was an evolution away from the original liberal synthesis that assumed knowledge of the Bible and Christianity while reinterpreting it. By the end of the century mysticism divorced from Christianity could become a rationalism, a Platonism, a Buddhism, a nature worship, or a universalism that sought value in all and refused to give preference to any religious tradition.

Liberalism opened Friends to new impulses, because God’s revelation could not be constrained by western civilization. The first generation of liberal Friends knew the Bible, knew modern theology and philosophy, and were aware of the centering of Friends in a community of Christians. Confident in their Christian heritage, they could explore Jung and Buddhism just as in the 17th century Friends had explored Descartes and the Jewish Kabala and in the 19th spiritualism and transcendentalism.

The difference can be summarized this way: when earlier Friends by stilling all self-will plunged deep into the human psyche, at its core they experienced not the id, ego, and superego or animal instincts, but God. Knowing God was natural and unnatural; that is, natural because the potential was universal, but unnatural because God was not a product of the human personality. The experience was a gift that added something, termed Seed or Light, to make Quakers children of the divine. So God was not innate in human personality. Liberals’ vagueness and metaphysical language allowed later generations to downplay the external gift and to make the Light in conscience a product of the essence of humanity.

A recent dissertation by Ben Pink Dandelion analyzing British Friends argues that the expression of virtually any sentiment is legitimate now in a meeting for worship, if spoken in a manner appropriate to Friends. Rather than a content, Quakerism has become a style, a style appropriate for meeting for worship, meeting for business, and personal behavior. English Friends will not judge content for those who deny the Inward Light, but only thank them for speaking openly and honestly.

A recent analysis of New England Yearly Meeting argues that the basic membership criterion has become “leading a Quaker life.” In practice this means ignoring theology and having a liberal WASP style, which cuts out large portions of the population. Since even God talk is seen as limiting or divisive, the new agenda can be summarized as “Peace, love, and granola.”

The difference between FGC in 1900 and the late 20th century is that earlier there was a vital shared Quaker Christian culture and an optimism that new knowledge in every field would support religious experience. The search for God began with an individual but ended with a community. Quakerism was not a do-your-own thing in search of inner tranquility, but a vehicle to power work for social justice.

Liberalism lost its institutional base and much of its intellectual vitality after the 1960s. The professors grew old, died, and there were few successors in the Eastern colleges. Swarthmore, Haverford, and Bryn Mawr now have no Quakers in their philosophy departments and no Quaker theologians in their religion departments. (And there have not been many Quaker applicants in religion at Swarthmore.) Their faculties no longer play a vital role in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting or FGC. And the decline took place not just among Quakers, but in other Protestant denominations like the Methodists, United Church of Christ, and Presbyterians. Liberal religion for the last 40 years has been in retreat, attacked on the right by those who saw its vagueness as undermining Christianity and on the left by those in revolt against its academic flavor and its use of redefined Christian language. So in essence, FGC Friends had identified completely with a religious interpretation that had lost its dynamism.

The two Philadelphia Yearly Meetings, which had stabilized membership in 1900–1950 after a decline of two-thirds in the 19th century, following reunification continued to fall in membership by almost one-third. FGC meetings have about the same number of members as in 1900, but this is only because of the addition of new unaffiliated meetings and the addition of former Orthodox meetings. (Note all religious statistics are bad, and Quaker membership numbers worst of all because the
formerly clear distinction between members and attenders has evaporated.) Liberalism attracted outsiders so we have survived, but the impression I get is that meetings have not been successful in retaining the children of members. A religious group dependent upon recruiting outsiders for its continuing survival at the same overall strength will not flourish in the rapidly growing marketplace of American religion because there is something lacking in its product. Welcoming diversity is a Quaker strength, but it can lead to a dangerously shallow definition of the responsibilities of membership and can impede common activity.

Pendle Hill has become the center of Quaker liberal mysticism, publishing pamphlets by Carol Murphy, Elizabeth Watson, John Youngblut, Doug Gwyn, and Parker Palmer. Carol Murphy became an FGC member at age 12. None of these is a birthright FGC Friend, and most either converted or became fellow travelers as adults. Most received their religious educations at non-Quaker institutions. None are university professors. Many began as evangelicals and several see their mission as appealing to FUM as well as FGC Friends. By and large they write pamphlets rather than books and devotional literature rather than systematic analysis of theological or ethical issues. (Doug Gwyn is an exception because he writes mostly books and grounds his theology in historical analysis.) By contrast, the first generations of English and American Quaker liberals like Jones and Cadbury were all birthright and wrote books as well as pamphlets. Before reunification, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Orthodox and the other Orthodox meetings produced philosophers, theologians, and Bible scholars, but now the combined yearly meetings in FGC produce weighty Friends, social activists, and earnest seekers.

Those few Friends who are interested in theology go to Earlham School of Religion, where they learn to use words left out of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting’s discipline; the quote in the recent Faith and Practice that says we are all theologians was written by a student at ESR. Since ESR is an institution designed to educate pastors for programmed meetings and is joined to Friends United Meeting, relying on it for theologians has strengths and liabilities. After all, the first generation of liberals started out as unhappy evangelicals.

By and large, FGC Friends are not much interested in, and therefore have been only slightly influenced by, major
post-liberal theological emphases—neo-Orthodoxy, Christian realism, the New Yale theology, narrative theology, process theology, liberation theology, feminist theology, and deconstruction. FRIENDS JOURNAL devotes little attention to formal theology, and few FGC Friends contribute to or read the periodical Quaker Religious Thought, which tends to be heavily evangelical. There is only one focus group on Quaker theology at this year’s FGC Gathering, none last year on basic Christian theology, and I suspect that our Bible study is more introductory and devotional than theoretical and academic.

Even when our history should have made us major players in new theological developments, such as feminist theology, Friends have been consumers rather than shapers. Our pioneering of new social concerns has not been paralleled by sensitivity to new intellectual developments. Strangely, at a time when Quakers have become better educated than ever before, when Quaker meetings flourish near college campuses, we seem to have become anti-intellectual on the subject of religion. In turning our back on modern theology we resemble fundamentalist Friends more than we care to admit. Like them, we ignore the challenge to faith and ethics brought by the revolutions taking place in biology, astronomy, and medicine.

Words in our disciplines like God, revelation, Christ-Spirit, prayer, Bible are not just Quaker words. We cannot cooperate with non-FGC Quakers or the National and World Councils of Churches on peace and justice issues without considering the relationship of what we believe to the past, present, and future of the Christian churches.

The liberals who created FGC had a thirst for knowledge, for linking the best in religion with the best in science, for drawing upon both to make ethical judgments. Today by becoming anti-intellectual in religion when we are well-educated, we have jettisoned the impulse that created FGC, reunited yearly meetings, redefined our role in wider society, and created the modern Peace Testimony. The kinds of energy we now devote to meditation techniques and inner spirituality needs to be spent on philosophy, science, and Christian religion.

The dangers from a renewed emphasis upon a rigorous theology are two: in the 19th century theology divided us, and early Quakers feared that intellectual endeavors might undermine the experiential basis of the meeting for worship. However, theology was only one of many causes
of the schisms, and early Friends, in spite of their distrust of theology, produced many tomes of it. In addition, we are already divided and, unlike earlier Friends, have learned to live disunited, even to make our diversity a virtue. So there is little prospect for theology now causing a new schism in FGC. In addition, we should remember that theology can provide a foundation for unity. We ought to be smart enough to realize that any formulation of what we believe or linking faith to modern thought is a secondary activity; to paraphrase Robert Barclay, words are a description of the fountain and not the stream of living water. Those who created FGC and reunited meetings knew the possibilities and dangers of theology, but they had a confidence that truth increased possibilities.

The post-1960 generations who saw how difficult it was to reunify and feared raising divisive issues also correctly perceived there were more pressing problems. They spent their energy dealing with the Cold War, Vietnam, civil rights, ecology, women’s emancipation, and a sexual revolution. Theology seemed less important than any of these challenges. In the last 30 years FGC Friends have exercised considerable creativity in responding to these issues. What I would like is for liberal Friends now to put all these ethical issues back into a theological agenda, for the new generation of Friends to become like Graham, who wrote books on conscientious objection as well as theology: Jones, who chaired AFSC and wrote philosophy; and Cadbury, also chair of AFSC and a Bible scholar. All three were creators as well as consumers of rigorous historical, ethical, philosophical, and theological thought.

The tragedy of Quakers is that since 1827 we have become numerically insignificant. One response, which could be legitimated by our history, would be to withdraw into sectarian isolation, to say that our concern is only an intense inner spirituality. This strategy, which made more sense when we lived on isolated farms and had no websites, now would require repudiating our emphases upon education and social activism. Alternatively we need to seek allies, and I suggest that our allies in understanding our faith as well as in political and social action will come from programmed Friends and liberals within Protestant and Catholic churches. The service agencies of many churches believe, with Friends, that peace and justice are one word.

To reiterate my theme: the liberal agenda of 1900 was to understand religious experience in terms of modern thought by using creatively the Bible, Christian theology, Quaker history, the fine arts, alternative religions and psychology, biology, and physics. Facing the world then was daunting and is a more challenging task today, but it is an endeavor that requires no fear. Creating a new theological synthesis for our faith would build on our liberal traditions in a creative way, be a good way to say Happy Birthday today, and affirm that we expect FGC to be a vital religious and intellectual movement in 2100.

I conclude as I began with a word of caution about the limits of our knowledge. Deconstruction theorists have made us wary of giving solidity to abstractions, like the terms liberalism, evangelicalism, Quakers, or Christianity. There was not in the past nor is there now a prototypical Quaker; instead, there are individuals who summarize a large or small part of their lives as being with a group of people of many ages who refer to themselves as Friends. At times, many of these seekers in prayer, in meeting for worship, in walks in nature, or in concerts have experiences they term religious and describe as the Inward Light or sense of the presence of God. Quakerism began as a movement to tell men and women about the availability of this kind of shared religious experience. It is a safe historical conclusion that so long as its rituals and belief foster that experience among diverse persons, the Religious Society of Friends will endure.

This speech was delivered from a longer text, “Three 20th-Century Revolutions,” focusing on teaching about the content of faith and theology, changing perspectives about morality, and the evolution of the Peace Testimony. The full text can be found at the FGC website <www.fgcquaker.org/library/history/frost1.html>.