

Honoring the Quaker Peace Testimony at Its 350th Anniversary

It has been common in western thought, from ancient times up until the present, to view reality as divided between an ideal world of spirituality and perfectedness, and a counterpart world of material and practical reality which is fallen and corrupted. This concept began with Plato and was given a theological overlay by Christianity. It invites the idea that truth and beauty are attractive but insubstantial, and that they are impossible of realization, while the demands of practical reality inevitably require various violent and ugly compromises, and radical departures from ideal concepts of purity and goodness.

Quaker spirituality, as well as other minority streams of Christian mysticism, and most eastern spiritualities, reject this dualistic view of reality. They affirm a true understanding of our situation, which is that the mundane and the divine are one. What so many mistakenly see as realms separate and apart are, in truth, so interdependent that one cannot be understood, or even spoken of, without the other. The official mainstream “realism” which ignores the unity of the ethical and practical spheres has given us a world in which the seeds of future strife and conflict are being sown day after day. There is the growth of a new global economic system which few understand and which no one seems to guide or govern. There are growing disparities between rich and poor. When concentrated wealth collides with extreme poverty, there is a snow-balling erosion of human rights and major threats to peace and freedom. Masses of people are put at the mercy of a few, even though we do not call it slavery; global economic arrangements may lead to malnutrition and death, even though we do not call it murder.

Congress has allocated over 1.1 trillion dollars to the global war on terror, rather than to the alleviation of poverty. Over \$366 billion of this is allocated to the war Afghanistan and the border areas of Pakistan, where, based on CIA estimates of the number of Al-Qaeda operating, we are spending about \$300 million per year per Al-Qaeda member to eliminate them.

This is happening while the five percent of the world’s population living in the United States consumes 30% of the world’s resources, while the people in foreign countries living on top of these resources survive only in abject poverty. Here within the United States wealth disparities have grown to such an extent that 1% of the people own 34% of the nation’s assets, while the bottom 50% own less than 3% collectively. It is increasingly difficult for ordinary Americans to get a college education, and people in Congress are seriously considering reducing the social security and medicare programs while proposing to extend the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans.

The idea that the unfettered free market magically transforms the greed of individuals into the common good, and that through it wealth somehow trickles down from the super-rich to the benefit of everyone else, is surely one of the most enduring exercises in wishful thinking humankind has ever known. In addition, the expectation that prosperity depends upon ever increasing growth seems to propel humankind’s economic life into a fatal war against the earth itself, a war which threatens irreparably to damage the very basis of human survival.

Attentiveness to the unity of the spiritual and the practical allows us to see that our propensity for war making, in addition to its unjustifiable cruelties, distracts us from the true causes of our problems and, in fact, compounds these very problems. Every ounce of energy given to war-making, every penny of our treasure, every allocation of human creativity, given over to war is taken

away from a focus on the true causes of the threats which face us.

As Jesus read the signs of his times, we must read the signs of ours. But we cannot blindly mimic Jesus. These are different times; the impending catastrophe is unlike anything that has come before it. Each epoch of human history occupies a unique place in the unfolding drama of the Creation and is given a special role to play. We, women and men inhabiting North Atlantic civilization at the beginning of the twenty-first century of the common era, also face such a distinct historical task, as have the ages which came before us. We are at one of the turning points of human history, when the old ways of doing things have become exhausted, having been overtaken by developments which they are inadequate to meet. It is a time in which a new ordering of human thought, feeling and affairs is necessary, not only that we may experience more satisfaction, but for survival's sake itself. How can frantically spending more and more money to kill more and more people possible carry us forward? Instead, we have the task of carefully listening for leadings that will take us beyond the current state of collapse, that will lay the basis for the next stage of civilization.

Underlying all the complex practical dilemmas we face are quandaries which are essentially spiritual quandaries. After all else is stripped away we realize that we must find a spiritual basis for collaboratively wrought solutions to practical problems. In the world of the future it is increasingly unlikely that any nation will be able to insure its own security at the expense of others. The common good requires our taking steps toward nuclear and conventional disarmament, economic and social development and justice, active conflict resolution, and the rescue of the environment.

Being faithful to God's call and to our human companions is a task fraught with complexity and strain. We live in a time of profound confusion. Disagreement and doubt are everywhere. Our peace testimony has to do, ultimately, with how decency and humanity can be identified and defended in an uncommonly degraded age. Yet authentic and prophetic peace witness means not sadness, not resignation, not anxiety, and not desperation, but joy, confidence and hope. We find hope in the realization that Truth is never without its witnesses: there are always people who are discriminating and independent, yet communicative, and responsive, and willing to join with others in the decent management of our common human affairs. Such people listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit, which shows us what, in existing circumstances, must unfailingly be done. It is to realize that justice and peace are legitimately the goals both of the City of God and of the earthly political order, and that our life in religion and our life as citizens compliment rather than contradict each other. It is to become instruments of the Divine Creative Plan, constantly upbuilding what folly threatens to dissolve, helping the world's people to grow together as a community through the reconciling love of the One in whom all things are One.

This is a great work to which Friends and all people of good will are called. Are we ready for the task? Our forebears have been bravely addressing these problems for 350 years. What, then, are *we* waiting for?

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