Trends in Quakerism: 1900-1940

The integrative tendencies of society in the twentieth century are gradually depriving the local historian of his subject matter. Wherever he looks today, he sees the part disappearing into a larger, transcendent whole. The history of the part becomes then a series of contributions to the whole and a history of the whole will adequately include the history of the part. An account of Quakerism in Pennsylvania becomes a part of the history of Quakerism in the world.

This was not the case in the last century. Thus one could write a history of either the Philadelphia Race Street Yearly Meeting (Hicksite) or of the Philadelphia Arch Street Yearly Meeting (Orthodox) from the date of their separation—1827—until 1900 not only without reference to each other but with only the most casual of references to any other Yearly Meeting. But from the latter date to the present such a procedure would omit nearly every development of note in the story of either body. The most important development of the Society of Friends in this century is the gradual breaking down of sectarian feeling between the various branches, resulting in unity of action in most fields. The World Conferences of Friends, inaugurated in England immediately after the World War and culminating in America at Swarthmore and Haverford Colleges in 1937, present a picture of an harmonious and united Society for which the nineteenth century offers no parallel.

Despite this tendency, however, it may safely be asserted that the Pennsylvania Yearly Meetings have been and remain influential out of all proportion to their numbers. Just as American Friends in general look to England for their early history and consequently endow the London Yearly Meeting with a certain odor of sanctity, something of the same may be said concerning the Philadelphia groups. The fact that Philadelphia is located on the Eastern seaboard also makes it a natural center for many of the more important general

1 It may surprise some to know that Pennsylvania Friends represent only approximately 10% of the membership in the United States and Canada. The largest groups are the so-called Five Years Meeting groups of the Middle West. These comprise approximately 75% of the total membership.
activities, notably the American Friends' Service Committee, and the antiquity of the Philadelphia groups and their consequent wealth works to the same effect.

The extent to which this is true is in part dependent, however, on the emphasis formerly placed upon "birthright" membership and marriage within the Society. Meetings of Friends have often had the appearance of groups of intimate families. A large meeting assumed some of the aspects of a family reunion. Questions of ancestry and relationship formed an inordinately large part of Friendly intercourse. Because little effort was made to proselytize, new meetings were formed usually by members who had removed from the vicinity of older meetings, and thus there were frequently actual ties of relationship between the members of even the newest meetings and the oldest. The schisms of the last century were peculiarly civil conflicts in which no Lincoln emerged and which no force could counteract. What bitterness there was—and there was considerable—was the acute bitterness of the blood-feud.

But this character of the Society also promoted a provinciality of interest and attitude already engendered by principles which served to set them apart from the rest of the world. Their social efforts, far from having any pretentious political basis, were largely of the type denoted by the term "philanthropic," and this was the usual name applied to their committees for the amelioration of social evils. Their interests were directed primarily toward ordering their own lives in accordance with their beliefs, however regrettably the rest of the world behaved, and in extending a humanitarian helping hand to certain depressed classes, notably those racial groups—the Negroes and Indians—who had been victims of the white man's exploitation. While they were active in such causes as prison reform and temperance, they were not officially concerned with problems raised by the economic structure of society. Friends generally felt regret when the anti-slavery movement took on a political complexion. Ever since the Commonwealth period in England, since, in fact, George Fox became not only the founder but the recognized authority, Friends have not attempted to realize their social ideals by political methods.  

2 See Cromwell and Communism by Eduard Bernstein. Especially Chapter XVI for an excellent account of the revolutionary character of the earliest Friends and the change when Fox's leadership prevailed.
But it is clear that such injustices as arise from the economic structure of society call more for political action than for "moral suasion." It should be recalled, also, that the Society was largely a middle-class trading and agricultural group, and during the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth century shared the Nonconformist conviction that thriftlessness and indigence were closely related, that even if poverty did not always emanate from ungodliness, at least the religiously observant were likely to prosper.  

Finally, before taking up the developments of the present century, the increasing influence of English Friends upon the American Society should be noted. From the earliest times there has been a constant correspondence between the American and London Yearly Meetings by way of epistles, visiting ministers, etc. In a century of civil friction, however, even this source furnished additional causes for division; as when J. J. Gurney, an English Friend, provided the *raison d'être* of one of the later schisms among American Friends—the Wilburite division. But in the later years of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth centuries, the English influence became very pronounced. Many of the recent developments in America had their beginnings in England: the General Conferences, the Young Friends Movement, the founding of summer schools, the founding of centers for advanced religious study, etc. As is so often found to be the case by the historian in other fields, it is but a slight exaggeration to say that the English lead and the Americans follow and expand.

II

The first faint indications of what was to become a definite trend in the twentieth century appeared with the inauguration of annual First-Day School Conferences (Hicksite) in 1868 and with the organization in Waynesville, Ohio, in 1882 of the Friends Union for Philanthropic Labor. In the following year these were held simultaneously. In 1894 a consideration of general religious subjects was added to the agenda and in 1896 an educational department. Be-

---

3 The clearest indication of this belief is furnished by the Friends' practice of disownment for failure in business. However, in this connection, it should not be forgotten that the Meeting exercised a close supervision over the businesses of its members.
beginning in 1902 these partially distinct elements were “merged into one General Conference in which the Young Friends Associations were also represented.” 4 Meetings of the Hicksite branch: New York, Genesee, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois are included in these biennial conferences. Philadelphia furnished about half the entire membership of this group.

Among the Orthodox branch a similar indication appeared in Indiana Yearly Meeting in 1886, when a general conference of Friends was called for, 5 and held the following year at Richmond, Indiana. All Orthodox Yearly Meetings in this country were officially represented except the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting which did not consider the matter. Later, it was agreed to hold such conferences every five years, and it was from this beginning that the Five Years Meeting became in 1902 a recognized group.

These two developments represent the first attempts after 1827 to establish some sort of unity among Friends in America, and it is perhaps significant that they arose in the more western groups. For it is also true that it was among these Western Friends that the older traditions were earliest and most completely relaxed. Congregational singing, the introduction of a pastoral system, a zeal to make converts and similar innovations, appear earliest among them. On the other hand, there were indications that the Society was revising its habits in the East as well.

During most of the nineteenth century, disownments were carried out with a severity which tended rapidly to decrease membership in a body which did not seek new members and had a low birth rate. “Marrying out of meeting” was the commonest offense, although it was an offense of almost equal gravity for Friends to be married under any other auspices than those of the Society. But in the late years of the nineteenth century such disownments became less frequent and now the practice is almost entirely obsolete. It was during these same years that Quaker bonnets fell into disuse and the Quaker language became more and more restricted to family intercourse.

Factors operating upon society in general during this period—urbanization, increased facilities for communication, greater educa-

5 Because of a fear of further divisions as a result of a second wave of evangelicalism. See Rufus Jones, The Later Periods of Quakerism, II, 930 et passim.
tional opportunities, and similar movements destructive of provincial prejudices—were having their effect upon the Society of Friends. But, above all, the effect of the romantic religious revivals of the last century was waning, and interest in theological questions—so dangerously schismatic to a society without a fixed creed—was giving place to a concern with secular matters; particularly to a question upon which Friends have been united from the beginning, the maintenance of peace between the men and nations of the world.

In Philadelphia, December 12-14, 1901, was held an "American Friends Peace Conference." Here for the first time since 1827 "all in America calling themselves Friends came together under that name on a common platform, and united in a common effort toward an end in which all were interested." This beginning was not, however, to be immediately fruitful, although from this date there appears a continually growing intercourse between the various branches. Other movements were stimulating these contacts. Even before official Young Friends Movements were generally established, young people from the different branches were meeting together to discuss common interests. The Summer Schools, the first of which was held at Haverford College in June, 1900, tended to have a similar effect. Though usually under the care of one branch, others frequently attended and the speakers were often not Friends. The "Woolman School for Social and Religious Education" was begun at Swarthmore, in 1915, under the care of the Hicksite Friends, but three years later it was transferred to a board composed of both Hicksite and Orthodox members "to broaden its usefulness."

By this time, however, the spectre of the World War had appeared and the efforts made by Friends to discover their contribution to the civilized world in such an emergency led to the founding of their most publicized activity: the American Friends Service Committee. Whatever its importance may have been or may yet be to the world at large, there is no doubt of its great importance to the Society which founded it. Through its medium, all Friends have finally found a way of working together, of pooling their resources and traditions in a wholly satisfactory manner.7

7 There are several accounts of the work of this committee both during and since the War. Perhaps the most acceptable to the average reader would be *Quakers in Action* by Lester M. Jones.
Largely as a result of working together during the War English and American Friends became really acquainted, and an All-Friends Conference was held in London in 1920. This represented the first truly international assembly of Friends.

After the War there appeared on the part of all American groups many signs of a desire to bury their old differences. Among the Philadelphia groups, the clearest indication was a change in the time of holding the Yearly Meeting so that both Yearly Meetings could come during the same week; this was done for the first time in 1933. Many of their committees now work together and it appears to be merely a matter of time before a more or less complete unification is achieved.

The climax of the trend we have been following was reached in September, 1937, in the Friends World Conference held at Swarthmore and Haverford Colleges. Nine hundred and eighty-five official delegates represented twenty-four countries of every continent of the world. And, highly conscious of this very trend, the Conference appointed a consultative committee to assist in the development of a world society. The results of this Conference were most satisfactory and unquestionably stimulated further movements towards unification in America.

III

In the meantime a change in habits of thinking about social problems was taking place, the beginning of a change of which the end is not yet. It is hinted at in an Epistle from the Baltimore Yearly Meeting to the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Race Street) in 1912:

A need was felt and expressed by those in charge of our philanthropic work of changing the basis of operations, in order to increase its usefulness, both by suggestion and effort. It was desired to bring into prominence the idea of social service, so emphasized in our different sessions, rather than the thought conveyed by the word “philanthropic.”

This is, of course, related to the social movements which appeared in most of the churches of the period; the new gospel of social service had a twentieth century ring to it that the older term lacked. The change in terminology reflects also the growing secularism of the
period: "philanthropic" implies charitable with a religious connotation; the term "social service" implies something less incidental to the donor, a greater involvement in the social scene. "Social service" was still an effort on the part of a reasonably prosperous middle class to mitigate the conditions of less fortunate groups but without the religious overtones which now seemed slightly hypocritical.

But for a society with a background of equalitarian principles, such a change might be prophetic of further change. Between 1900 and the post-War years, the social fabric of the Society had undergone considerable alteration. The group of prosperous farmers and traders, provincial, thrifty, and with an elementary education had become a group of suburbanites with a college education, internationally minded, but still for the most part definitely—and more and more precariously—middle class. Again, London took precedence in the appointment of a Social Order committee in 1915, followed by the Philadelphia Arch Street Meeting in 1917 and by the Philadelphia Race Street Meeting in the next year. These committees were originally sponsored because it was felt that the War indicated that something was wrong with the whole structure of society. Following the depression of the early Thirties, they came to look upon the industrial structure with considerable scepticism. When the World Conference of 1937 met, the American members of the Conference committee on "Methods of Achieving Economic, Racial and International Justice" are recommending for legislation:

the regulation of monopolies; the control and development of natural resources of the country for the benefit of the people; excess profit taxes; taxes on the unearned increment in land values; taxation of speculative incomes at a higher rate than earned incomes . . . graduated inheritance taxes; elimination of high protective tariffs; and legislation which will guarantee the right of collective bargaining to the workers.8

And they are concerned with "the non-violent technique of social change." This tendency towards a radical position proceeds timidly, theoretically, and apologetically: the middle class is still just able to maintain itself, and Friends are peculiarly incompetent to deal with the problems which the decline of their class must inevitably produce.

For in spite of an increasing interest in higher education among Friends since the middle of the last century, there is little evidence of a genuine intellectual movement developing within the Society. This is regrettable since it seems likely to disqualify them for making contributions of real importance to the modern world. In regard to secular interests, their traditional disdain for the scholarly or scientific disciplines makes a comprehensive and realistic approach to social and economic problems almost impossible. Intuition may prompt one to take up a life of poverty, to renounce the social and industrial system, or to protest against its injustices, but it can hardly be expected to outline effective solutions for a highly complex industrial civilization. The Friends' interest in reconstructing the social order will therefore probably remain amateurish and tentative.

In regard to mystical interests, their freedom from creedal limitations and their intuitionist basis provides them with an intellectually tenable position which many churches might envy. But, caught by the predominantly secular viewpoint of this century, their tardiness in recognizing the usefulness of intellectual as distinguished from intuitional procedures for exposition and elucidation, and a traditionally warped view of the arts, the Friends have almost completely failed to develop the possibilities latent in their position. These possibilities are not wholly unrecognized. Dr. Jesse Holmes of Swarthmore and Dr. Rufus Jones of Haverford among others have frequently urged the necessity of expounding Friends' views in a contemporary idiom. In 1930, Pendle Hill, a school for postgraduate students or adults, was founded at Wallingford, Pennsylvania. Under the directorship of Howard and Anna Cox Brinton, a promising, but belated, step was made in this direction. Dr. Brinton's own volume, *The Mystic Will*, a study of the works of the German mystic, Jacob Boehme, is one of the few publications by an avowed member of the Society which gives evidence of a profound intellectual maturity and an attempt to relate its subject to the general culture of our time. But until there is a more general appreciation both of scholarly and creative work among the members of the Society, little can be anticipated.

However, the Friends may have an unspectacular but not unimportant role to play: to cultivate among a few the spiritual intuitions
of mankind, to cherish a faith in the individual inspiration through the darkest hours. For this an intellectual background is unnecessary, is perhaps, as the early Friends appear to have believed, even prejudicial. And there is reason to think that such a function is congenial to the Society. From their earliest days, they have had a kind of seminal influence. Many splendid men and women have been produced among them, have been nurtured by them, and then, having outgrown the Society's provincial limitations, have left them. Their biggest men, measured in worldly terms, do not remain among them. But there are more despicable functions than to be the nursery of men imbued with the ideals of George Fox.

For such a role, the Society's avoidance of the political arena—even in the best of causes—should be insisted upon. For the danger to the Society in our period is that the secular may become so dominant that the only element which binds the Friends into a unified group—the mystical—will be lost to sight altogether. A recent report of the Service Committee notes this danger:

At no time must the view prevail that Friends are merely assisting in the administration of relief. Rather this work is the natural expression of our Quaker way of life. The spiritual and intellectual contributions which the work of the Service Committee makes to the world far exceeds the material benefits. More particularly, to our own membership, this work has been the medium for leading Friends more fully into that spirit that makes wars impossible and unnecessary.9

Once placed upon a completely secular basis, the whole value of the undertaking would be lost: there would be no more reason for being a Friend than for being a member of the Red Cross, or of any other purely secular organization interested in social reform. Also, any attempt to further their views by political means—and a strong, popular organization such as that represented by the Service Committee itself will offer tempting possibilities for such furtherance—would be likely to develop cleavages among them quite as serious as were those of the past.

It is the function of the spiritual to maintain the vision, to keep alive the interest in the reality of the brotherhood of man, to insist upon charity and love as ultimate and attainable ideals. Our con-

temporary distrust of the spiritual in itself lays a heavy enough burden upon the defenders of the faith. The practical implementation must of necessity be left to others.

IV

For those accustomed to view the Friends as a harmless, if odd and stubborn, sect, it is pleasant to be able to conclude on a traditional note. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose is peculiarly true of this conservative group. The following quotation is from “Extracts from the Minutes of the Yearly Meeting of Friends,” Race Street, Philadelphia, 1910:

The blessing of a yearly meeting, of a yearly pause from the engrossing demands of the physical . . . to consider that the outward and the physical is not all or even the most, but that we have a spiritual nature, a soul to culture and to save. . . . Page 123.

Another quotation from the same source just thirty years later:

It is becoming only too evident that there can be no great civilization, no enduring peace, no fellowship of nations, no security of individual or community life without the culture of the spirit. . . . Page 15.

As the first mirrors the challenge of the physical sciences, the latter reflects the challenge of the social scene; to a world in transition, the similarity of the answers evoked offers a merest touch of reassurance.

University of Pennsylvania

George Haines, IV