

Do You Know Who You're Worshipping With?

A few weeks ago, Mary Ellen Krisher and I attended the Quaker Lecture at Wilmington College. Brent Bill, Quaker minister, author, retreat leader, and congregational consultant, addressed current divisions among Friends and our lack of patience with each other's points of view. (For those who remain blissfully unaware of current division among Friends—and that may be the absolutely best way to deal with it—issues causing friction are the divinity of Christ, the Atonement (i.e., Christ died for our sins), and same-sex marriage.) At his farm outside Indianapolis, Brent Bill said, a Friends In Fellowship Worship Group meets every two weeks on Sunday evenings. "It is a place of theological hospitality," where "Everybody—Quaker or not—is welcome." Twenty to thirty people, including evangelical Friends, liberal Friends, a couple of Lutherans and others, meet to worship together. Can you imagine? A period of silent worship followed by "spiritual discussion" among people of diverging theologies who respect and listen to each other.

After Bill's talk, I asked Marvin Hall, General Superintendent of Wilmington Yearly Meeting, what he thought the chances were of Friends in our yearly meeting practicing "theological hospitality" toward each other. "Not very good," he answered ruefully. Unfortunately, I agree. For it to work, everyone—liberal Friends and evangelical Friends—would have to change. Instead of being rigid and unyielding, we would *all* have to become open, flexible and non-judgmental. (Good luck with that.)

So where does Cincinnati Friends Meeting stand on the issues dividing our own and other yearly meetings? Are we divided? On only one issue is there a clear answer to that question. In matters relating to homosexuality, our meeting *has* taken a clear stand—a few years ago, Cincinnati Friends Meeting declared itself to be "an open and

affirming” congregation—a position that puts it at odds with the yearly meeting and which cost it several members who left in protest. But what do Friends here believe about the Divinity of Christ and the necessity of Atonement? What about God? Do we, like many mainline churches have what Marcus Borg describes as a “Don’t ask, don’t tell” approach to the question of God”? What difference does it make anyway?

In last week’s Meeting for Business, our newest member voiced his concern that, when people ask him what Cincinnati Friends believe, he has difficulty answering, particularly when it comes to the peace testimony. He knows, he says, what Quaker *writers* say about the peace testimony; he just doesn’t know how people in this meeting feel about it. In the Quakerism 101 study group, we talked about the range of beliefs among Friends, from fundamentalist, evangelical Friends to Quaker Universalists to Buddhist Quakers to those who are essentially secular Quakers. We also discussed the differences in Wilmington Yearly Meeting over issues such as the divinity of Christ, the necessity of Atonement, the Richmond Declaration of 1887, and same-sex marriage. New attenders wonder, on this range of belief, where are members of Cincinnati Friends Meeting? The Congregational Survey conducted in March suggests some answers, but, though the results were made available to everyone, we haven’t discussed them. In today’s bulletin, you will see a sampling of questions and responses from the survey and a Query about them. If you haven’t picked up a copy of the survey results, I invite you to do so (copies in the Library) and to notice the range of beliefs in this congregation.

I am aware that some people resist labels; I understand that concern. But where do we stand together? Does unquestioning acceptance of any belief give us a solid enough foundation? Among Unitarian Universalists, a denomination known for its unquestioning acceptance of any belief, there is great concern because their numbers are

dwindling. As a denomination, Unitarian Universalists serve the valuable function of providing refuge for those who have been wounded by more dogmatic denominations. Once their spiritual wounds have healed, however, seekers don't tend to stay in a UU church in spite of the openness and tolerance; their spiritual needs remain unmet by the intellectual, rational stance of UUs in general.

Then, too, although the first Universalists were definitively Christians who asserted that the loving God made known to us through Jesus Christ would not send anyone to hell, and that everyone was already "saved," the Christian part of the message has been lost, purposefully omitted from the Unitarian Universalist denomination, and the word "universalist" has come to be associated with the notion that all religions are true. Quaker writer Samuel Caldwell terms this "pseudo-universalism," which is also embraced these days by people identifying themselves as liberal Quakers. Caldwell says:

pseudo-universalism institutionalizes seeking and is highly suspicious of finding in religious life . . . It offers no genuine spiritual path of its own, while discouraging its adherents from embarking on any established path.

Because it is a view of religion and not a religion itself, and because it accepts no particular religious tradition as normative, pseudo-universalism has within it no principle whereby it can discriminate between what is true and what is false in any particular religious view.

I experienced this when I was a UU minister. When anything and everything is all right, then nothing really matters, and there is no solid place to stand. The "foundation" was soft and squishy, subject to frequent change, and a little like standing on marshmallows. I found the early version of Universalist thought more appealing because, while accepting differences, it acknowledged the higher teachings of Christianity as its primary guiding principle. Caldwell describes "Quaker Universalism," which he says

is founded on the premise that there is one true principle of discernment, and that is the Inner Light. In addition, . . . although Quaker Universalism radically challenges Christianity at many points, it also has historically accepted Jesus Christ and the gospel tradition as normative for faithful living.

Is it not important for visitors to this Meeting—even for members and regular attenders—to have an idea of what we believe and live by? Loving acceptance of all, including those who disagree with us, should be one, but *only one*, of the values we hold most dear. As a group of Friends, can we not examine and clarify our common understandings of Friends’ testimonies of integrity, equality, simplicity, and peace? I am not saying we must all agree, nor accept word-for-word some statement of belief—in fact, I quote the clearest statement of the admonition *against* this as it was given in 1656 by the Elders at Balby Meeting in England who had written some “advices” to members of their meeting:

Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with the measure of light which is pure and holy may be guided; and so in the Light walking and avoiding, these things may be fulfilled in the Sprit, not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.

The reference in the last sentence is to 2 Corinthians 3, verse 6: [God] “hath made us able ministers of the new covenant; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter kills, but the spirit gives life,” In other words, holding fast to rigid rules, creeds, or dogma, enforcing laws strictly to the letter, is counter-productive to spirituality; following *the spirit* of the law, however, “gives life” to our spirituality. The assumption here is that there are some “rules or forms” to use as guides, not that we simply do whatever we want to do.

From private conversations, I know people in this meeting hesitant to voice their deepest beliefs during Meeting for Worship, partly from fear of censure, lack of understanding or criticism, and because they don’t know what others in the Meeting

believe. In other situations, many of us have experienced negative reactions to open express of our spiritual nature. As theologian Walter Wink writes:

One of the best ways to discern the weakness of a social system is to discover what it excludes from conversation. . . . What does late 20th century Western society exclude from conversation? Certainly not sex; at least in more “sophisticated” circles accounts of sexual exploits scarcely raise an eyebrow. But if you want to bring all talk to a halt in shocked embarrassment, every eye riveted on you, try mentioning angels, or demons, or the devil. You will be quickly appraised for signs of pathological violence and then quietly shunned.

Angels, spirits, principalities, powers, gods, Satan—these, along with all other spiritual realities, are unmentionables of our culture. The dominant materialistic worldview has absolutely no place for them. . . . And it has massive resistance even to thinking about these phenomena, having fought so long and hard to rid itself of every vestige of transcendence.

Cincinnati Friends Meeting is a social system. Where is our weakness, i.e., what do we exclude from conversation? I was told at one point that the words “God” and “Jesus” were offensive, at least to one person. Should we, as a group, exclude these words and concepts from our conversation? My response then and now is this: If we can’t talk about God (whatever you choose to call it) and the teachings of Jesus in worship on Sunday morning, when and where can we talk about it? But what else do we exclude from conversation? Can we talk about precognition through dreams and visions? About reincarnation? About evil as a force or presence? About being guided, about encountering a presence we understand to be divine? Shouldn’t we seek to know the people with whom we worship? We stand little chance of ever being a gathered meeting if we don’t know or trust each other with our spiritual lives and gifts.