

Too Much Stuff; Not Enough Peace

by Donne Hayden

Many here are “convinced Friends” who did not grow up in Quaker households, so you may not be aware that Quakers have not traditionally celebrated Christmas. Founder George Fox wrote in his Journal: “When the time called Christmas came, while others were feasting and sporting themselves I looked out poor widows from house to house, and gave them some money.” According to Quaker historian Bill Samuels,

. . . the general consensus of those knowledgeable about Friends history that there was long a testimony against the celebration of special days. Friends schools remained open on Christmas day, and Friends in business were expected to keep their shops open. Their attitude on this is probably well reflected in the following 1993 statement by a tiny group of "Primitive Friends:"

“As we hold that one day is no more holy than another, as all days are the gift of the most High, do we continue to maintain a firm Christian witness that our members do not join in any public fasts, feasts, so-called holy-days and religious festivals (such as times called ‘Christmas’ and ‘Easter’ by some) . . .”

Today, Quaker groups generally do not have a rigid testimony against their members observing Christmas or other special days. Many Friends churches and meetings have some special observance of Christmas. Practices vary widely.¹

Though earlier Quakers did not celebrate Christmas with gift-giving, etc., the pressures from secular culture were always there, and as in our own time, pressure was strongest among the young. For instance, in 1864, a nineteen-year-old Quaker named Martha Maddock from West Elkton, Ohio, was a student at Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana where she shared a room with her cousin, Sallie, also from West Elkton. In December, Martha wrote the following in a letter home to her parents.

Is father coming up to see me pretty soon? I wish he would. It will be ten weeks tomorrow since I left home to come to Earlham. Sallie and I expect to look for some of

¹ Bill Samuel, “Friends (Quakers) and Christmas,” QuakerInfo.org website, <http://www.quakerinfo.com/quakxmas.shtml>

you up the last of this week or next whether you come or not. Come at Christmas and bring me a Christmas gift.²

Apparently Christmas came and went with no visit from her father. On New Year's Day, 1865, Martha wrote another letter:

Well, father, thee is coming up to see us this week, is thee? We are going to look any how. We looked some last week but were disappointed. There were so many boxes come for some of the girls—nearly every girl got something but I and Sallie. I just wish you could be here and see the things that are sent here. I never knew what it was to get any thing till I came here and now I know what it is. It made I and Sallie feel bad yesterday when so many things rolled in but none for us. But we hope ours are to come yet. Sallie says send a New Year's gift to both.

Mother, send me some new handkerchiefs as I need them so bad. If thee has not time to hem them, I can do it if thee will send me some thread. Please send some more needles—small-like (I lost some of mine) and anything else thee thinks I need. I do not know as I need any thing [unless] thee will send me more towels and I can hem them well enough. Sallie says bring all thee can, Father.

Sallie says tell Aunt Patsy to be sure to send those things Tommy left there for her. And to send a white spool of thread, number between 24 and 36, not finer than 36. Mother, please send me some more ruffle and a belt. That is all. Some more good Mince pie if thee has it; if not, some other that is good; any thing here is good.

Father come fifth day sure and be at meeting.

So no more but will close by requesting you to write soon. If thee comes up, I will not look for a letter.

Tell Ella to send some of their good black apples. So no more, but remain as ever your affectionate daughter, Mattie

P.S. Mother please send me some scraps of cloth such as to make pin cushions, lamp mats—something for me to work at on Seventh Days. If I had some yarn, I would knit a tidy Well I will quit and not ask for anything more or thee will tire of me.

Martha Ann

(In January, her father came and brought lots of presents.)

Eventually, most Quakers joined the rest of American culture in exchanging gifts at Christmas time, though, as Bill Samuels points out: “Friends generally react strongly against the commercialism of the season, and endeavor to reflect the Quaker simplicity testimony in their observances. Like the young George Fox, many mark Christmas with special concern for those near and far who are living in poverty and/or despair.” In the

² Transcription of Letters of Martha Maddock by Donne Hayden. Original letters are in the archives of the Preble County Historical Society, Eaton, Ohio.

foyer of Cincinnati Friends meetinghouse, four boxes for donations of food and clothing to the needy reflect that concern among Friends at this meeting.

The prevalent attitude in this country toward Christmas, however, is clear in the advertising of our consumer culture, which tells us that what we must give *stuff*, and it must be bigger, better, newer, and more of everything if it is to be *enough*. So we Americans buy more stuff to go in houses already filled and overflowing with stuff. People now rent storage units to store stuff that no longer fits in the house and garage. Still, each Christmas finds us buying more stuff for those we love and those for whom we feel obliged to buy presents. It seems we have “bought” the idea that loving and giving equals buying stuff.

Recently, another pressure added to Christmas are tense reports on the news about whether or not people are spending *enough*. What is the temperature of consumerism this year? What sort of shopping season is set in motion the Friday after Thanksgiving? Will people buy enough to keep the economy from collapsing? Now, it seems we have a *responsibility* to consume—if we took a Christmas off, say, and through mutual agreement with family members, gave to various charities *all* the money we might have spent on buying more stuff, we might cause the markets to fail. Good grief! We might bring on another depression! Better go out and buy something—anything, just more stuff.

Last year, I heard this story on the radio:

A woman was out Christmas shopping with her two children. After many hours of looking at row after row of toys and everything else imaginable, and after hours of hearing both her children asking for everything they saw on those many shelves, she finally made it to the elevator with her two kids.

She was feeling what so many of us feel during the holiday season time of the year. Overwhelming pressure to get that perfect gift for every single person on our shopping list, to make sure we don't forget anyone on our card list, and to respond to

everyone who sends us a card, to go to every party, every housewarming, to prepare and indulge in all the holiday food and treats.

Finally the elevator doors opened; there was already a crowd in the car. She pushed her way into the elevator, dragging her two kids in with her along with various bags of stuff. When the doors closed and she stood squinched between glaring strangers, she couldn't take it anymore and muttered, "Whoever started this whole Christmas thing should be found, strung up and shot."

From the back of the elevator, a quiet calm voice responded, "Don't worry; we already crucified him." For the rest of the trip down, it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop.³

Now, of course, we know that the woman meant whoever started the consumerism associated with Christmas, but it is sobering to remember that Christmas actually "began" with the birth of a Jewish child two thousand years ago. No matter what you believe about the figure of Jesus, whether you believe he is the "only beloved Son of God," or question if he even existed, he is associated with a message whose truth remains powerfully present today: "Love God; love one another; love your neighbor as yourself; love your enemy." We humans still find that a hard truth to live by, but occasionally we see inspiring examples of this truth manifested.

Though we are subjected to smarmy advertising geared to stimulate the purchase response, somewhere in us the ancient truth resonates that Christmas is supposed to be about something else. Something like "Peace on earth, good will among people." Who can argue that this would be a good idea? But, you say, I am willing to be peaceful and I am filled with good will—it's those other people who are causing all the trouble. It's those liberals, those conservatives, those Latin-American immigrants, those terrorists, those Iraqis, the Taliban. We can't have peace on earth until *those people* show some

³ Heard on NPR, 2007. Found on North County Community Church website: http://www.northccc.com/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=123

good will. Well, folks, as I'm sure you are aware, in matters of love and hate, peace and war, it takes two to tango.

Speaking of "Peace on earth," I recommend to you a movie that came out in 2005—*Joyeux Noel*, French for "Merry Christmas"—you can rent it at Blockbuster. It is based on the true story of the 1914 Christmas truce that happened spontaneously along the front lines during World War I. In late afternoon on Christmas Eve, December 24, 1914, in the region of Ypres, Belgium, artillery in the region fell silent. In the cold dusk, German troops began decorating the area around their trenches for Christmas. They placed candles in trees, then launched into singing Christmas carols. In the trenches across from them, British troops responded by singing English carols. When the German troops began "Stille Nacht," the British troops joined them, singing "Silent Night" in English. The two sides shouted Christmas greetings to each other. Then someone called for visits across the "No Man's Land" where small gifts were exchanged — whisky, jam, cigars, chocolate, and so on. The truce spread to other areas of the lines, and there are many stories of soccer matches between the opposing forces. The truce allowed burial parties to retrieve the bodies of the recently fallen, to bring them back and give them "proper burials." Soldiers from both sides mourned the dead together.

The truce lasted through Christmas day and night; in some areas, it continued until New Year's Day. It occurred in spite of opposition from generals and commanders, and afterward, those involved were reprimanded, punished, and separated from each other.

In all of the following years of the war, artillery bombardments were ordered on Christmas Eve to ensure that there were no further lulls in the combat. Troops were also

rotated through various sectors of the front to prevent them from becoming overly familiar with the enemy.⁴

What would the military and/or government do if we all loved our enemies, thus effectively eliminating them?

In 1914, that spontaneous, soldier-initiated Christmas truce in the midst of war demonstrated that individual human beings, left to themselves, given some control over their own actions, may manifest a spirit of love, peace and good will. Unfortunately, each year, that spirit is, like the “person who started Christmas,” crucified again by corporate greed, blind consumerism and governments that specialize in creating ill-will and new enemies.

Today, in this ten days before Christmas, to help us focus on love, peace and good will, I would like to read from “The Divine Community” by Abbé de la Mennais (1782-1854), a French philosopher and priest eventually left the Church, which too often did not practice what it preached.

You have but a day to spend upon the earth; endeavor to spend it in peace.
Peace is the fruit of love; to love in peace, it is necessary to tolerate many things.
No one is perfect; all have their defects; each one leans upon the rest, and love alone can render this weight light.

If you cannot bear your brothers and sisters, how can your brothers and sisters bear with you? Love your kindred in the world, and love them to the end.

Love is indefatigable; it never wearies. Love is inexhaustible; it has life springing up within itself; and the more it is scattered, the more it abounds.

The heart of one who loves is a paradise upon earth: the Source of Love is within such a one . . .

You say you love, and many of your kindred humans lack bread to support life, garments to cover their naked limbs, a roof to shelter them, while you have all things in abundance.

You say that you love, yet there are many sick, languishing, destitute of help, on their poor couches; many unfortunates have no one to weep with them;

Little children who wander numbed with cold, from door to door, asking the rich for a crumb from their table; yet they obtain it not.

⁴ “Christmas Truce,” Answers.com website, <http://www.answers.com/topic/christmas-truce>.

You say that you love your human kindred; what then would you do more if you hated them?

But I say unto you that whosoever, being able, succors not her brother who is in affliction, is the enemy of her brother; and whosoever, being able, feeds not his sister who is hungry, is her murderer.

There are those who love none but themselves; and these are people of hatred, for to love only one's self is to hate others.

In the city of Love each loves his kindred as himself; and, therefore, none are forsaken, or in suffering, if there be any cure for their suffering.

In the city of Love no one sacrifices another, but each one is ready to sacrifice for others.

The great Source of All Love did not create the limbs of children to be broken by irons, nor their souls to be destroyed by slavery.

The Source of Love united them in families, and all families are sisters; the Source of Love united them in nations, and all nations are sisters; and whosoever separates families from families, nations from nations, divides that which Love has united.

And that which joins families to families, nations to nations, is first the law of Love, the law of justice and charity, and then the law of liberty, which is also the law of Love.⁵



⁵ Abbé de la Mennais, "The Divine Community." Modified from *Antiphonal Readings for Free Worship*, collected and arranged by L. Griswold Williams (Boston: The Murray Press, 1933), page 53. Where Mennais used the word "God," I have replaced it with "the Source of Love," which is my personal understanding of "God."