

Worship & Action for Peace Letter
October 8, 2004

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

This is the second in a planned series of three letters by members of the NYYM Worship and Action for Peace working group. This week's letter discusses Friends' relationship with authority. The next letter will discuss Mediated Relationships. The Worship & Action working group welcomes your responses, your stories & visions. You can respond through the NYYM office by email to paul@nyym.org or by regular mail at 15 Rutherford Place, New York, New York 10003.

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OF GOD AND GOVERNMENT

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him
in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.
And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor,
for it has been given to me,
and I can give it to anyone I want to.
So if you worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered, "It is written:
'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.' "

(Gospel According to Luke 4:5-8 [NIV])

Friends have long had an uneasy relationship with formal authority (in contrast to the authority of revelation and experience) and with hierarchical governance institutions. Yet the state, the government, is organized in relationships of hierarchy and coercive authority, as well as of service. How should we as Friends relate to the "sovereign state" and other institutions of power? What can our faith, experience and history teach us about reconciling the sometimes conflicting commands of God and the demands of the state?

This letter invites consideration of the character of government as an institution, how that leads to war, and Friends stances toward government in different times and places. It challenges us to look again at obedience, moral obligation and faithfulness, with attention to the peace testimony.

Governments and other institutions serve many invaluable functions. Yet a common definition of "sovereignty" is to possess a monopoly on the legitimate use of lethal force. Even short of "lethal force", the state frequently functions by proscriptive and

prescriptive coercion. And those involved in running governments and other collective bodies may become so bound up in pursuing their institution's self-interest that they lose sight of moral truths and values which would govern, or at least influence, their individual conduct.

Writing in the wake of the devastation of World War I and the rise of ruthless bolshevism in Russia and fascism on the European continent, Reinhold Niebuhr investigated the nature of nations. In works such as *Moral Man & Immoral Society* (Charles Scribner's Sons 1932), he describes how, in building collective relationships and institutions, we unavoidably diminish, if we do not lose entirely, certain ethical and moral ideals and restraints. He concludes that collective systems, like nations, are driven by rules of group self-interest that override principles by which individuals may seek to be guided in their personal interactions. As described by Langdon B. Gilkey in his Introduction to the Library of Theological Ethics edition of *Moral Man & Immoral Society* (at pages xiv–xv), Niebuhr determined that:

There is a notable difference between the moral behavior of individuals - where there is some real possibility of self-sacrifice for others ... - and the behavior of groups.... With communities, the self-interest of the group is inevitably the predominant factor; and many things an individual will not do, a group will do together to further its fortunes and, of course, those of its members. It is, therefore, perfectly possible for the same persons to act quite morally, or respectably, according to the customs and values of their society, and yet, in relation to persons in other groups and particularly to the other groups themselves, to act very unethically. Hence there can be, without contradiction, the pious slave-owner, the respectable member of a ruling class or aggressive nation, the "moral" member of an oppressive race. In all these cases, while these persons may appear to be moral as individuals, nonetheless they join with others of their group and act with exceeding self-concern, with oppressive ruthlessness, and with devastating destruction.

Chris Hedges describes how this phenomenon leads people to embrace that most immoral action - the killing in the name of nationalism we call "war". In *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (Anchor Books 2002), he explains:

Lurking beneath the surface of every society, including ours, is the passionate yearning for a nationalist cause that exalts us, the kind that war alone is able to deliver. It reduces and at times erases the anxiety of individual consciousness. We abandon individual responsibility for a shared, unquestioned communal enterprise, however morally dubious.

Walter Wink seeks to avoid the implications of the "immoral society" by arguing institutions, too, have angels and, while they may be fallen today, they can be saved. He reminds us of the many positive virtues of social organization in order to appeal for

corrective engagement with authority. In *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Fortress Press 1992), Wink insists (at page 65):

The good news is that God not only liberates us from the Powers, but liberates the Powers as well. The gospel is not a dualistic myth of good and evil forces vying for ascendancy, as in the myth of redemptive violence. It is a sublimely subtle drama about the intertwining of good and evil in all of historical reality. The powers are not simply evil. They are a bulwark against anarchy, and a patron, repository, and inspirer of art. They inculcate values that encourage interdependency, mutual care, and social cohesiveness. They encourage submission of personal desires to the general good of everyone. Their evil is not intrinsic, but rather the result of idolatry. Therefore they can be redeemed.

Perhaps. In the meantime, Friends must live and interact with the sovereign as it exists in this moment. Are we left without options to complicity with the domination system? How are we to discern when to engage the Powers and when to stand in witness against acts of inequity and inhumanity? And when we engage, do we come to employ the instruments of coercion to attain our ideals or the goals of our own institutions?

The Society of Friends has struggled from its inception with this dilemma. The earliest Friends may have believed they were chosen to rule as God's instruments, but the political reality of their precarious situation quickly led them to the roots of our Peace Testimony and to declarations of faithfulness to God over competing demands of the sovereign. See H. Larry Ingle, *The Politics of Despair: The Quaker Peace Testimony, 1661*, www.kimopress.com/Ingle-01.htm . In "A Declaration from the harmless and innocent people of God, called Quakers, against all plotters and fighters in the world", addressed to Charles II (January 21, 1661), George Fox, Richard Hubberthorne and 10 other Friends famously confessed "we ... do utterly deny ... all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretense whatsoever." (The text of the Declaration is available online at: <http://www.quaker.org/peaceweb/pdecla07.html> .) They also described their developing understanding of a right relationship between God and government:

And the cause of all this our sufferings [at the hands of the state] is not for any evil, but for things relating to the worship of our God in obedience to his requirings of us. For which cause we shall freely give up our bodies a sacrifice, rather than disobey the Lord. For we know, as the Lord hath kept us innocent, so he will plead our cause, when there is none in the earth to plead it. So we, in obedience to his truth, do not love our lives unto the death, that we may do his will, and wrong no man in our generation, but seek the good and peace of all men.

Similarly, in their Epistle in 1656, the Elders at Balby admonished "That care be taken, that as any are called before outward powers of the nation, that in the light, obedience

to the Lord be given." (As set forth in the copy in the Lancashire Records Office at Preston, from the papers of Marsden Monthly Meeting, available online at <http://www.qhpress.org/texts/balby.html> .) And Isaac Penington wrote: "The great error of the ages of the apostacy hath been to set up an outward order and uniformity, and to make men's consciences bend thereto, either by arguments of wisdom, or by force; but the property of the true church government is, to leave the conscience to its full liberty in the Lord, to preserve it single and entire of the Lord to exercise, and to seek unity in the light and in the Spirit, walking sweetly and harmoniously together in the midst of different practices." (*Works*, 1681 ed., Pt. 1, at pages 240–41.)

Describing the struggles between Gnostic and orthodox Christians over the meaning of authority and over ascendancy in the new faith, Elaine Pagels in *The Gnostic Gospels* (Random House 1979) observes the long history of tension between revelatory faith and formal authority. Perhaps overstating the case as it relates to Friends, she notes (at pages 46–47):

[W]e can see throughout the history of Christianity how varying beliefs about the nature of God inevitably bear different political implications. Martin Luther ... felt impelled by his own religious experience and his transformed understanding of God to challenge practices endorsed by his superiors in the Catholic Church, and finally to reject its entire papal priestly system. George Fox, the radical visionary who founded the Quaker movement, was moved by his encounter with the "inner light" to denounce the whole structure of Puritan authority - legal, governmental, and religious. Paul Tillich proclaimed the doctrine of "God beyond God" as he criticized both Protestant and Catholic churches along with nationalistic and fascist governments.

A softening of this position may be discerned as the Society of Friends over time became comfortable in the wider community. For example, the "Declaration of Faith"—issued by a conference in Richmond, Indiana, in September 1887 attended by 95 delegates appointed by 12 yearly meetings representing Orthodox Friends—affirms "That conscience should be free, and that in matters of religious doctrine and worship man is accountable only to God..." (available online at: <http://www.quakerinfo.com/rdf.shtml>), but proceeds to exalt the holy nature of "civil government":

We have ever maintained that it is the duty of Christians to obey the enactments of civil government, except those which interfere with our allegiance to God. We owe much to its blessings. Through it we enjoy liberty and protection, in connection with law and order. Civil government is a divine ordinance, (Rom 13:1, 1 Pet 2:13–16) instituted to promote the best welfare of man, hence magistrates are to be regarded as God's ministers who should be a terror to evildoers and a praise to them that do

well. Therefore, it is with us a matter of conscience to render them respect and obedience in the exercise of their proper functions.

Apparently utilizing a paraphrasing by William C. Braithwaite in *The Beginnings of Quakerism* (London: Macmillan 1912), our own *Faith and Practice* offers a radical recasting of the advice of the Elders of Balby quoted above. Rather than saying “that in the light, obedience to the Lord be given”, the version in NYYM *Faith and Practice* (2001 ed. at page 78) reads: “Any called before outward powers of the nation are to obey.”

Friends also have on occasion wandered from core beliefs when they held the reins of government or experienced the intoxication of privilege or nationalism. When Quakers ran Rhode Island during the “King Philip’s War” of the 1670s, they forsook the lessons of the peace testimony for the responsibilities of governance. See Chuck Fager, Review Essay: “A Great Deep: The Peace Testimony and Historical Realism,” *Quaker Theology* # 6 (Spring 2002), <http://www.quaker.org/quest/issue6-4-Fager-Deep01.htm> (discussing *Walking in the Way of Peace: Quaker Pacifism in the Seventeenth Century*, Meredith Baldwin Weddle (Oxford University Press 2001)). Until late in the eighteenth century, many pious and upstanding Friends defended the institution of slavery and nearly caused John Woolman to be read out of the Society for his unyielding abolitionist position. Upon the United States’ entry into World War I, a large group of Hicksite Friends published a statement supporting the war as justified by “the long history of Germany’s intrigue and barbarism” and “organized savagery,” and “proclaim[ing] our loyalty to the Cause of Civilization, and to the President of the United States....” *Some Particular Advices for Friends & A Statement of Loyalty for Others* (March 1918), <http://www.kimopress.com/PRO-war-1918.htm> .

In contrast, Friends in Great Britain held a meeting in the autumn of 1938, “the largest in the history of the [S]ociety in Great Britain,” to consider the Peace Testimony. In Nora Waln’s reflection on being “. . . A True Friend in a Totalitarian State [Nazi Germany]” (from Jessamyn West, *The Quaker Reader* (Viking Press 1962) at page 497), she quotes from the final minute of that gathering:

We have looked over the world and at home, and we have seen everywhere the denial of those standards of human relationships which Jesus Christ showed to us. Some evils stand out clearly, some we know that we are only just beginning to recognize. God has met us here, and in His presence we have reaffirmed the testimony of our society against all war for whatsoever purpose and have determined to make that testimony our own today.

In *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (University of North Carolina Press 2004), David L. Chappell explores the spiritual underpinnings of the civil rights movement and its leaders. He describes the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr’s work on Martin Luther King, Jr. and offers King’s insights on the dilemma of being a

good citizen while being faithful to God. Quoting from a Martin Luther King essay on "Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethical Dualism" (1952), David Chappell explains King's view as follows (at pages 52, 80-81):

Government is a necessity, but "Niebhur makes it quite clear that government ... must never be looked upon as divine." King alludes to Niebuhr's belief that Christianity, even orthodoxy, is sometimes subversive. "When government pretends to be divine, the Christian serves God rather than man.

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The strenuous Christian command to hate the sin but love the sinner, or as Niebuhr more academically put it, the "spiritual discipline against resentment," was the crucial link between King's insistence on the inevitable evil of all politics and his insistence that political action was nonetheless a moral obligation.

When we are called before outward Powers today, how do we wish, as individuals, as a Society, to respond? Do we feel compelled, in the words of the Richmond Declaration of Faith, to obey the "divine ordinance" of the state? Or "when government pretends to be divine," do we "serve God rather than man"? In response to civil government, do Friends have a moral obligation for political action? How shall we make the peace testimony our own today?

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