

Worship and Action Update, 10/24/03

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

Where does our peace testimony lead New York Yearly Meeting Friends now? What are our responsibilities in these times toward our country; in addressing war and militarism? In these times, how are we responding to God?

Beloved, our world is in trouble. At the same time, our God is throughout, sufficient and reassuring. We struggle to bring these dimensions of our experience together in our worship.

Institutions such as our prison system and concerted actions of our nation such as our invasion of Iraq demonstrate how deeply the "myth of redemptive violence" (Walter Wink) is embedded in our nation's psyche. This element of our nation's apparent belief system is not a simple confidence in the use of "superior" force to bring about resolution of situations of entrenched conflict, nor is it the seeming inability to conceive of alternatives to lethal force for addressing dilemmas, as in "liberating" a people from tyranny. The myth of redemptive violence is about the very conception and nature of God.

Questions about God in the context of our nation's leadership and decision-making have been raised by recent media reports of comments by a United States military officer newly appointed to the position of deputy secretary of defense for intelligence. Speaking in evangelical churches around the country over the past year, Lt. Gen. William Boykin expressed a faith that blends Christian beliefs with devotion to militarism, a vision of a warrior God and his "Christian army": "I knew that my God was bigger than his [a Somali Muslim combatant]. I knew that my God was a real God, and his was an idol."; "The battle that we're in is a spiritual battle. Satan wants to destroy this nation, he wants to destroy us as a nation, and he wants to destroy us as a Christian army."; I am a "warrior for the kingdom of God."; "We in the army of God, in the house of God, in the kingdom of God, have been raised for such a time as this." (Quotations drawn from "*Backward Christian soldier: An open letter to the Christian General*", Jim Wallis, Sojo.net (Sojourners), <http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=sojomail.display&issue=102203#2>; and "*Terrorist Hunter Draws Fire for Divisive Religious Views*", Bob Allen, 10-17-03, EthicsDaily.com (an imprint of the Baptist Center for Ethics), http://www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3247; and James Carroll, cited below.)

William Boykin's messages were well-received in the churches in which he spoke.

How do Friends understand and reconcile belief in a Christian warrior with a testimony of peace in response to a loving and universal god? Early friends such as George Fox and James Naylor were very clear about fierce struggles between good and evil,

darkness and Light – struggles which take place within and among ourselves as well as in social, economic and political systems. They believed in spiritual warfare, fought with spiritual not outward weapons (see Ephesians 6:10-18) – a struggle that seeks and recognizes that of God in every other person, even as we confront evil. Some Friends today feel drawn to compassionate listening and not to the Lamb's War. Are they mutually exclusive? Does our peace testimony lead us to different places? In either case, are we prepared to name and unmask the powers?

Do we know God well enough to make a judgment about others' views? Do we know God well enough to trust in a way forward? Even if it sets us at odds with others?

Faith and Practice (2001) (at page 32) reminds us that, in speaking truth, we also must seek the truth in others and our oneness:

The Hebrew prophets, our Society's founders, and dissidents in all times often found themselves in conflict with others for speaking from inward-directed truth. This habit is a source of controversy today, even amongst ourselves, when our experiences and the ways in which we communicate them do not fit others' perceptions or convictions. We encourage Friends to express, listen to, and welcome disagreements as new ways to understand the truth.... Do our words tend towards the harmony, love, and truth that glorify God? To speak the truth is important, and sometimes truth will necessarily cause pain in the process of healing, but we would do well before we speak to consider that our words may hurt others or stir up ill feeling or partisanship..... Our communication, as spoken deeds, helps build or destroy what Jesus called the Kingdom of Heaven. We urge Friends to avoid speaking or acting in ways that divide insiders from outsiders.

An inclusive, freeing religious possibility for our public life, our national belief system, is held out by James Carroll, writing in the Boston Globe, after he analyzes the "exclusivist" views of Lt. Gen. William Boykin ("Warring with God", October 21, 2003, www.boston.com/dailyglobe2/294/oped/Warring_with_God+.shtml):

[T]he problem goes deeper than a crudely expressed religious chauvinism. In point of fact, the general's remarks do not make him an extremist. It was unfashionable of him to speak aloud the implications of his "abiding faith," but exclusivist claims made for Jesus Christ by most Christians implicitly insult the religion of others.

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Boykin makes the question urgent: What kind of God does this general - and the nation he serves - believe in? Boykin describes a "bigger" God in conflict with smaller gods, vanquishing them. Idols get smashed. The

soldier's faith is braced by the assumption that God, too, can have recourse to violence, and foundational texts of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and other religions posit just that.

"The Lord is a man of war," says Exodus (15:3). As violence is one of the notes of the human condition, religions often attribute it to God, and then divine violence cycles back to justify the human propensity to act violently. The omnipotent warrior God is ... firmly entrenched in the human imagination....

The ethical dilemma facing all religions today, but perhaps especially religions of revelation, is laid bare here: How to affirm one's own faith without denigrating the faith of others? The problem can seem unsolvable if religion is understood as inherently dialectic - reality defined as oppositions between earth and heaven, the natural and the supernatural, knowledge and revelation, atheism and theism, secularism and faith, evil and good. If the religious imagination is necessarily structured on such polarities, then religion is inevitably a source of conflict, contempt, violence. My faith is true, yours is idolatry. My God is bigger than your god. My God is a warrior, and so am I.

But there can be such a thing as an inclusivist religious faith that rejects this way of thinking. Instead of polarity, this other way of being religious assumes unity - unity between God and God's creation, which serves in turn as a source of unity among God's creatures. This reconciling truth is what all the great religions - certainly the three Abrahamic religions - assert when they identify God, most basically, not with conflict but with love.

General Boykin says that his God is "real" because his God brings him victory in battle. But the first standard against which the reality of God is measured, even in Boykin's own Christian tradition, is not "bigness or power but empathetic love. God is love, and the only way to honor God is by loving the neighbor. This is not a minor theme but the essential affirmation.

Therefore Boykin has it wrong - but so do legions of his fellow believers The general's offense was to speak aloud the implication of a still broadly held theology.

Friends, what are our responsibilities toward our community and our country? Does our peace testimony lead us to take up questions of the nature of God with our neighbors? With each other?

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One way we hold one another up is by sharing our difficulties and help we have found in facing difficulties. The Worship and Action retreat gatherings are opportunities for sharing. You may still register for the upcoming NYYM Worship and Action for Peace Retreat Gatherings on the question, "Where is our peace testimony leading New York Yearly Meeting Friends now?": October 31 - November 2 at Powell House; October 31 - November 1 at the Rotary Sunshine Camp near Rochester, NY; and in New Jersey, November 14 - 15 at Rahway & Plainfield Meeting House. Detailed information, registration forms and driving directions are available on the NYYM Web site at <http://www.nyyym.org/events/retreats31oct03.html> .

Peaceable greetings,

Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, and Fred Dettmer
NYYM Worship and Action working group

There is that of God in everyone. This principle of the Inward Light, the Christ Within, illumines for us every corner of religion, philosophy, ethics, morals, daily living, social relationships, and international relations.

Before we can express this faith to others, whether in words or in deeds, we must first experience the reality of the Inward Light in our own souls. Then we are released to be faithful to this Spirit. The corporate and personal disciplines Friends have used are the means by which we have found and experienced the presence of God. Through these disciplines we have been able to remain faithful in our witness to the world.

"Cast aside, now, thy burdensome cares and put away thy toilsome business. Yield room for some little time to God." – Anselm (1033-1109), Proslogium

"Seek, and ye shall find," said Jesus. From the beginning Friends have emphasized the search. We do not have the whole truth. But we can search diligently for understanding and use some of the guides that help us grow toward the Light."

Faith and Practice (2001), at Page 12