Knowing Experimentally

In "Christ-Centeredness and Quaker Identity" (*FJ* July), R. Scot Miller writes that his "fear is that Quakerism will be swallowed by the universals of the modern world, and when the universals are practiced, there are no 'heretics' to express an alternative vision of what faith might look like." He urges us to keep our unique voice Christ-centered. He reserves particular concern about the presence of nontheist Friends among us potentially "devaluing the praxis of a worship community whose identity was profoundly centered in the person of Jesus of Nazareth."

Arriving yesterday from the Friends General Conference Gathering and finding this in the issue of FRIENDS JOURNAL that greeted my return home, I contrast it with my experience in a weeklong workshop on "Quaker Identity and the Heart of Our Faith." I completely agree that it is important to stay grounded in the roots of our Quaker faith and our "practice of peculiarities." I understand and I agree that we must not "abandon our history" and the value of "its presence in our witness." Let me assure you that though I have met many, I have never met a nontheist Friend who believed otherwise.

I disagree deeply about what R. Scot Miller lays claim to as the essence of that faith and heritage. It is wrong to assert that this essence is a belief in the supernatural Christ Jesus. The heart of Quakerism as a religion, as a tradition, and as praxis, is instead, at its essence, a belief in the primacy of "knowing experimentally," of each person having the capacity for unmediated direct access to the experience of the sacred.

As evidence for his stance, Miller quotes from Fox's *Journal* the passage in which, during his central religious transformative experience, Fox heard the words, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition." Read on, Friend. The paragraph ends, "And this I knew experimentally." Here is the soul of our religion, built up from the foundation of George Fox's epiphany.

In Fox's personal religious, historical, and social context, he had no possibility of interpreting his experience other than in terms of Jesus Christ. But he did know from this ineffable, self-validating experiential basis that it was the direct personal experience of that source that made the difference, and he went on to understand that every person had the capacity to directly know "that of God" within him or her. It is on this rock that our church is built.

From the principle that all may have direct experience of the Divine, it is a small step to the Testimony of Integrity, with its mandate of truth-telling and its difficult call to live our beliefs, to act in accord with the divine inspiration and knowledge available to one willing to seek it. Equality comes naturally forth, since all have that capacity for unmediated access, and so must we all be equals with respect to it. Simplicity as a testimony arises from the demanding depth and fundamental importance of that unmediated personal experience, which calls for ignoring and stepping aside from that which distracts from and is not grounded within that experience. Many Friends in our modern world are finding that the unmediated religious experience's importance calls us not only to step aside from distractions, but to step towards the care of our Earth as we understand our interconnectivity with all things, and link this care to a sense of the importance of fairly sharing the world's resources. Peace is a testimony that came late to Quakerism, as Fox recruited many of Cromwell's former soldiers; yet it, too, came to be understood as called for by the sacred nature of that within each of us and its call to each of us towards love, creation, and affirmation rather than hatred, violence, and destruction.

I dwell on the testimonies to make the point that none require Christ Jesus. Each stands on its own, affirmed and grounded in what Fox taught us we can know "experimentally." Another distinct and characteristic Quaker practice founded on the same rock is the practice of coming to unity on decisions in worship, which enables us to rise above personal issues and power struggles to find solutions led by that great and deep "experimental" force within us. Waiting worshipfully in silent expectation is of course our signature mode of religious praxis, and the one that often makes it possible to come to unity. We liberal unprogrammed Friends consider the rejection of professional minsters as a core component of our Quaker practice, which places on each of us as individuals the responsibility, as it affirms our power, to find minstry within ourselves and each other without a church hierarchy that might undermine our personal connection to the experiential core of our religious experience.

Once again, belief in Christ Jesus, the supernatural Son of God, is neither necessary nor sufficient for a strong Religious Society of Friends.

Miller offers a prayer for nontheists such as I, and I gratefully accept his hope that I and others like me in the Religious Society of Friends may find wholeness as "kinder and gentler materialists." I don't pray for divine intervention in which I do not believe, so I cannot return the favor per se, but I shall instead pray to you directly.

R. Scot Miller, I pray to you to seek within yourself in that deep font of love and wisdom from which we all may drink if we choose, rich and nuanced responses to some queries:

Of the many nontheists among Friends, many in weighty roles, who among them would you ask to leave?

In the eyes of Jesus Christ as you know him, which is more important, belief or behavior?

For each of us Quakers, from our varied and diverse backgrounds, all of whom may know "experimentally" the ineffable, self-validating, and enormously important religious experience at the core of our faith, must we all call it by the same name?

What would it be like to imagine how trust, love, and faith could overcome the fear that "there will be no Quakers left to work for the equal standing of all faiths in the world community" if we embrace our nontheist Friends?

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