

What Is a Moral Economy?

Quaker Institute for the Future

What does it mean to speak of a moral economy? The economy is a network of institutions and individuals engaged in exchange transactions. It is a network of relationships. Morality is all about relating—about how we relate, directly and indirectly, to other persons, other species, and more generally the world. Economic decisions and economic and financial institutions have impacts on how we relate. So we can properly ask, “Does the economy reflect and support right relating?” “Do we have a moral economy?”

Quaker testimonies are about right relating so a Quaker inquiry would start from our testimonies as criteria to test whether the economy expresses and supports right relating. It would then have to ask what an economy that supports right relating might look like, what would need to change, and what we Quakers need to witness for and against if we are to be strategic in effecting change.

Quaker Institute for the Future has initiated a new project, *Toward a Moral Economy*, designed to start out on this inquiry. We aim to create several workgroups, each deal-

ing with a separate element of the inquiry: the purposes of the economy, its scale, its fairness, the nature of money, and the other institutions that express and shape economic relationships. These groups will produce papers for a conference, which is being planned for the summer of 2006. They may, or may not, reflect unity in the workgroup that produced them. While we shall seek unity, the papers may need simply to reflect different and unresolved perspectives and the dialogue between them.

We seek to identify and assemble Quaker researchers and practitioners interested in contributing to this inquiry. The workshops began in the fall of 2005. We aim to experiment with the idea of Quakerly, Spirit-led reviews of draft material.


The conference would be publicly advertised to attract people from faith communities, corporations, not-for-profit organisations, and academia, some of whom will be specifically invited. A “book of the conference” is envisaged. In addition, somewhat after the pattern used by U.S. Catholic Bishops in 1984 when they prepared a draft Pastoral Letter for public discus-

sion, a letter would be drafted, drawing on the conference and workshop materials, for discussion and response by Quaker and other faith communities and the wider public.

We see this project as continuing in the long tradition of Quaker inquiry and witness, in the spirit of John Woolman, Joseph Rowntree, Rufus Jones, and Kenneth Boulding, to name only a few whose work is our inspiration.

We are seeking funding for the project but hope that some participants will have, or be able to find, funding for their research contribution and participation. We shall seek hospitality from Monthly Meetings for workgroup activities.

We have invited known commentators to respond to these papers in a public conference. We also know that there are many Quakers researching or practicing in relevant fields, and we hope very much to hear from you and have you join in this work.

To learn more about the Institute, please contact Peter Brown at peter.g.brown@mccgill.ca. 

In the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

— *Earth Charter*