

Some thoughts on Quaker “otherness”

By Kyle Jolliffe

What interests me more about the topic “Quakers and other Faiths” is not how unprogrammed Quakers interact with other branches of Quakerism or other churches, but the distinct “otherness” which has existed since the founding of Quakerism in England in the 1650s. Since those early days a very individual religion which eschews very programmed church services led by trained ministers or a “hireling ministry” has survived and made its own special contributions to the religious life of Canada and elsewhere. A good example of this “otherness” can be found in a slender book entitled *Spiritual Life ... Personal Thoughts* privately published in 1932, by Charles Zavitz.

He was a scientist and college professor and a prominent member of Genesee Yearly Meeting (a predecessor of Canadian Yearly Meeting) in the early twentieth century.

For Zavitz, “Even very highly organized and fully programmed church services are of but little avail unless the individual members are vitally influenced by the Divine Spirit within themselves. ‘God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.’” He wondered why so many professing Christians “deprive themselves of so much Spiritual Power by adhering to many non-essentials which divide into many individual churches and sects which cause so much confusion and competition and sometimes strife and even bitterness? Jesus said ‘Behold, the Kingdom of God is within you.’”

Obviously someone like Charles Zavitz deeply felt much more in tune with silent worship in the Quaker style than a more programmed form of church services. I personally find the tone of his words to be sincere but a touch too formal, and like something more evocative written in 1916 by Thomas Kelly (1893-1941), author of the Quaker classic, *A Testament of Devotion*.

At the time, Kelly was teaching at Pickering College, the Quaker boarding school in Newmarket, Ontario. In a letter to his family back in Wilmington, Ohio, he told them about going one Sunday to the

Methodist church in nearby Aurora.

After arriving just in time to hear the opening music, he described the church organ as “dinky” and called the preacher “awfully funny.” Kelly said that the preacher “put the emphasis on the wrong words, and made gestures most elaborately, but at times entirely useless.” He acknowledged in his letter that he probably shouldn’t have talked about the meeting, but said that he didn’t appreciate it perhaps because it got on his nerves. He concluded his description of the church by saying that “there is a lot more rot surging up in my heart to say about the place, but my conscience forbids.”

Those familiar with the story of the life of Thomas Kelly know that it was one of an intense religious quest which ended in a sudden death from a heart attack. Perhaps somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between Thomas Kelly’s trying experience that long-ago Sunday and the lucid words of Charles Zavitz lies the experience of many Friends and attenders. In my own experience I have seen people embrace different and distinct aspects of Quakerism. Some love the silence of the worship and/or the vocal ministry that takes place. Others value the Quaker meeting for business process. Some also delve into the rich and diverse writings of Quakers. And many thrive on the fellowship of other persons with similar social concerns.

Of course, it is not an easy thing to weave together in a meeting or worship group what has attracted people to Quakerism. Many more come as “seekers” than as “stayers” to our meetings. Sometimes personality conflicts deeply divide us. In the end, though, there is more than enough to create a Quaker faith separate from other faiths, in which the following words of Isaac Pennington (1616-1679) still resonate:

“And O, how sweet and pleasant it is to the truly spiritual eye to see several sorts of believers, several forms of Christians in the school of Christ, every one learning their own lesson, performing their own peculiar service, and knowing, owning, and loving one another in their several places and different performances to their Master.” ☞

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