

What Is the Moral Assignment?

Human Solidarity and the Quaker Peace Testimony

Part One of a Two-Part Article, By Keith Helmuth

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THE PEACE TESTIMONY AND ECONOMIC RELATIONSHIPS

In May of 1987, I made a presentation to the annual meeting of Friends World Committee for Consultation, Northeast Region, under the title "If John Woolman Were Among Us." In that discussion, and in the Canadian Quaker Pamphlet subsequently published under the same title, I offered an analysis of Woolman as an ecological thinker. In that context I wrote as follows:

Virtually all his discussions on spiritual disorders cross over into their socio-economic consequences. And all his discussions concerning social and economic behaviour lead back to their spiritual foundations. It is this continual probing of the relationship between socioeconomic behaviour and spiritual consciousness, and his recognition that minds possessed of the spirit of domination lead to social and economic disorder and ecosystem breakdown that makes Woolman well worth studying with respect to our environmental crisis.

This crisis - a crisis that involves the social ecology of justice as well as earth's biotic integrity - has now been greatly complicated by war having been made an overt institutional feature of American economic life and international policy. As we revisit the Quaker peace testimony in this context, revisiting John Woolman can help frame our work in an important way.

Following Woolman's lead, it is an increasingly obvious aspect of our situation that spiritual life and economic life converge into a single focus. Within the integrity of this focus it is also increasingly obvious that Friends' peace testimony applies to economic rela-

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tionships as well as to the entire panorama of the human/earth relationship. Woolman was particularly lucid in his expression of this perception. He wrote as follows on his journey to visit an Aboriginal village:

The sun appearing, we set forward, and as I rode over the barren hills my Meditations were on the alterations of the circumstances of the

natives of this land since the coming in of the English. The lands near the sea are conveniently situated for fishing. The lands near the rivers, where the tides flow, and some above, are in many places fertile and not mountainous, while the running of the tides makes passing up and down easy... Those natives have in some places, for trifling considerations, sold their inheritance so favourably situated, and in other places have been driven back by superior force... I had a prospect of the English along the coast for upward of nine hundred miles where I have traveled. And the favourable situation of the English and the difficulties attending the natives in many places, and the Negroes, were open before me... And a weighty and heavenly care came over my mind... And in this lonely journey I did this day greatly bewail the spreading of a wrong spirit, believing that the prosperous, convenient situation of the English

requires a constant attention to divine love and wisdom, to guide and support us in a way answerable to the will of that good gracious, and almighty Being who hath an equal regard to all mankind. And here luxury and covetousness, with numerous oppressions and other evils attending them, appeared very afflicting to me, and I felt in that which is immutable that the seeds of great calamity and desolation are sown and growing fast

on this continent. Nor have I words sufficient to set forth that longing I then felt that we who are placed along the coast, and have tasted the love and goodness of God, might rise in his strength and like faithful messengers labour to check the growth of these seeds, that they may not ripen to the ruin of our posterity.

I suggest we now stand with John Woolman in a similar exercise, but instead of picturing just nine hundred miles of the Atlantic coast and a hundred miles or so inland, we take a look at the whole earth and the relationship between the rich and the poor. Picture John Woolman, along with a great company of Friends, standing on a metaphorical Pendle Hill viewing the spread of economic behaviour world wide that increasingly rewards those who are already “favourably situated” and writes off a growing number of people who, for whatever reason, are being excluded from the benefits of capital growth and accumulation. No words could be more apt for this situation than to say “the seeds of great calamity and desolation are sown and growing fast on this” earth. No question could be more pertinent for Friends and the peace testimony than asking how we should now “labour to check the growth of these seeds.” Whatever else is feeding the mix that is causing militant and deadly action against the U.S. and its allied interests, there can be no doubt that mounting resentment over a global economic regime that enriches the rich and further impoverishes the poor is fundamental to the case.

Some folks may think it is unfair to characterize the capital-driven,

global economic regime in this way. Isn't the growth and advance of this kind of economic activity set to eventually lift the world out of poverty? Those in charge of capital-driven economic development say, in effect, “Just give us a little longer, just a little more time and we will bring everything out to a glorious and universally beneficial conclusion.” But we all know this is not likely. This is not the direction things are going. It is not a matter of whether the world is getting wealthier. It is a matter of the trajectory along which wealth development is taking place and the question of why developing wealth is not reducing inequities. The war

IMAGINE THE PEACE TESTIMONY... REINVESTED WITH THE FULL MORAL WEIGHT OF QUAKER TRADITION

on terrorism puts the world on notice that the present U.S. administration has no intention of effectively addressing this situation, and will brook no interference in the advance of U.S. economic interests world wide. This is not to say the U.S. government could not change its policies and become a powerful and effective force for social justice and inequity reduction in the world. It certainly could, but this kind of change in behaviour is a matter of moral commitment informing policy and policy is a matter of politics.

THE MORAL ASSIGNMENT AND MORAL CONFUSION

Near the end of his short life, Martin Luther King, like John

Woolman, saw how certain kinds of economic behaviour become “seeds of war.” He began to focus on a sense of justice that challenged patterns of domination, inequity and oppression in American economic behaviour and its world wide extensions. Within this enlarged context he asked the question: “What is the moral assignment?” This question has a deep resonance for Friends. Obviously, it connects with the peace testimony, but it also moves beyond it. It moves to a place where testimony, to remain authentic, takes up an “assignment” and gets to work. The “assignment” may vary from time to time, or it may change dramatically with circumstances, but when life is lived in the Spirit it never ceases to be a factor of guidance.

“What is the moral assignment?” This question is now writ large across the landscape of fear, across the behaviour of the U.S. government and its first strike war mentality and across Friends consideration of the peace testimony. Does it make sense, in this context, to imagine the peace testimony can be reinvested with the full moral weight of Quaker tradition? Some Friends and Friends organizations have not hesitated to advance a heightened sense of relevance for the peace testimony. Some Friends, on the other hand, have complained that they find these expressions ringing hollow in their minds, and that their own sense of moral response remains confused. The confusion, apparently, stems from feeling a moral response must be made to

the terrorist strikes against the U.S., but, at the same time, seeing no way for the peace testimony to make such a response. One Friend publicly wondered if, in times this bad, an argument might be made for withdrawing from political life altogether and adopting a Quaker version of the “two kingdom” theology.

A key process in sorting out this dilemma is assessing the role of the American economy with respect to the development of human solidarity and the global common good. If it seems likely that the current American economic system, and its allied interests world wide, will work out for the best for everyone in the long run, then protecting it with military action makes a certain kind of sense. If, on the other hand and as seems more clearly to be the case, the orientation of the American economy is toward increasing inequity and the breakdown of biotic integrity, then protecting it with violence only compounds an already bad situation, and will make reform and recovery, when it comes — if it comes — all the more difficult to accomplish. Those, like Woolman, who see the connection between a certain kind of economic behaviour and war, will also see that the articulation of the peace testimony as a path to an alternative future is now more important than ever. Those who live in this conviction will be clarified in their resolve by bad times, not weakened and confused.

If we ask how Woolman would view this situation, there is not much room for hesitation. The economic behaviour, property relations and social ecology he saw in his time

as sowing the seeds of “great calamity and desolation” are still in effect today, but with the added force of an economic growth imperative. These “seeds,” as he predicted, have grown fast and are now over spreading the human settlements of earth

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to such an extent that serious scholars of world trends have an increasingly difficult time avoiding the language of catastrophe in describing the trajectories they see emerging. It is hard to imagine a greater degree of congruence across time than between Woolman’s assessment and warning and the events that are currently unfolding.

REINVESTING TRADITION

Canadian philosopher, George Grant, used to tell his students that when truth is uncertain the best guide is tradition. He spoke as a Christian and as a Classicist who lamented the deep moral confusion into which “modernisation” was plunging Western Civilization. He warned that the modernizing, instrumentalist worldview, which sees the whole earth — including humans — as grist for the mill of economic development, will destroy the moral sense of relationship in community that is the real achievement of our history. This achievement has been battered by state politics from both the left and right, but

it is now the instrumentalist politics of the American economy, and its privileged world wide extensions, that are truly eliminating human solidarity and the common good from both vision and policy.

The trajectory on which the current U.S. administration has launched its global reach has set those of us who are working for an expanded sense of human solidarity sharply back on our heels. It is a time of discouragement, moral confusion and of a temptation to retreat into the personal. It is a time when the truth of almost everything public is uncertain. In such a time, Friends would do well, I believe, to follow George Grant’s conservative advice. The peace testimony is a tradition that has been tested beyond the rising and falling of personal feelings, beyond the vagaries of cultural fashion and beyond the economic imperatives that now drive our society, and much of the world, to both wealth and ruin. It is a bellwether and a marker for the path to an altogether different kind of economics, property relations and social ecology. We need not only to reinvest the peace testimony with the full moral weight of the Quaker tradition, but to imbue it with a fully rounded understanding of the relationship between economic behaviour and war.

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(This article will be concluded in the next issue of *The Canadian Friend*.)