

Queries on the Peace Testimony



Eleanor Miller/The Witness

by John Webster Gastil

As we near the 21st century, how strong is our Quaker peace testimony? We might suppose that our testimonies are powerful, citing our determined opposition to the Gulf War. But the war in the Gulf, involving outright U.S. deceit, double standards, and cold militarism, was hardly a test of our convictions.

Would we be so resolute if we were asked to spill blood not for oil, but for freedom and life itself? Imagine the South African apartheid government launching a full-scale war against its non-white population. Imagine the U.S. sending soldiers to fight against the

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apartheid armies. Would Friends take to the streets and wave banners protesting the deployment of U.S. troops? Would the American Friends Service Committee and Friends Committee on National Legislation steadfastly reaffirm Friends' opposition to violence?

Historically, Friends have faced real dilemmas of war and peace. The War of Independence, the Civil War, and two world wars forced Friends to reexamine their testimonies against violence. Recent decades, however, have not challenged us with "just" U.S. wars. When George Bush brutally invaded Panama under the banner, "Operation Just Cause," he did anything but shake our consciences. Likewise, Vietnam, Grenada, and other U.S. military ventures have not forced painful introspection.

This has left me and many of my generation uncertain about the meaning of our nonviolent creed. Moreover, I suspect that Quakers, both young and old, lack clearness on the testimony. Throughout this century, individual Friends and Quaker organizations have published testimonies that present contradictory views on nonviolence. In fact, during the two world wars, one in three eligible British and U.S. Friends enlisted in their respective armies (E. W. Orr, *Quakers in Peace & War*, 1974).

If our testimony is rusting, now is the time to anneal it, firing up our spiritual forges to restore the definition and resilience of our faith. With this purpose at heart, I have examined my conscience, my experience, and previous Quaker writings. I have distilled four basic controversies surrounding the peace testimony, each of which I have phrased as a query. In the remainder of this essay, I address each of these questions, summarizing different Quaker views and presenting my own personal convictions.

What is the basis of our convictions?

Modern Quakers' opposition to nonviolence comes from both rational and spiritual sources. The AFSC explained in its 1955 classic, *Speak Truth to Power*, "We believe it is practical, and politically relevant, for men and women to move the world toward peace by individually practicing peace themselves...." This pragmatic stance contrasts with the Friends World Committee for Consultation's 1965 statement, *No Time But This Present*: "...The Christian Peace Testimony...focuses on obedience to Christ and does not suppose that non-resistance will always succeed. Success is really beside the point. Obedience to the will of the conquering Lamb is the point."

My own pacifism attempts to incorporate both of these views, standing upon both rationalist and spiritual foundations. I have come to believe that nonviolence is often a practical tool for thwarting violence and teaching peace. Nonviolence also has immediate rewards for its practitioners, offering greater opportunities for physical and psychological health.

The endurance of my convictions, however, comes from a spiritual source. I refuse violence and pursue peace because I choose to believe there is that of God in everyone. This faith exists out-

side the canons of reason and scientific inquiry. It can neither be proven nor disproven, and I make no empirical claims as to its effectiveness. My faith is simply a religious principle upon which I have decided to live.

Does our testimony reject all forms of violence?

This question moves us from the foundation of our beliefs to the beliefs themselves. On this issue, the official report of the 1920 Conference of All Friends spoke plainly: "The Quaker Peace Testimony is a denial of all outward wars or fighting for whatever reason." Quakers have steadfastly opposed war, at least in official doctrine, but they have interpreted "fighting for whatever reason" in various and sundry ways.

Some Friends have supported "lightly armed" UN peacekeeping forces. Most have endorsed the idea, if not always the practices, of police and national guards. Many Quakers have also suggested that coercive intervention is appropriate if the attacker is acting impulsively or irrationally, whether due to stress, mental illness, or youth. Friends have also sympathized with non-lethal self-defense, particularly when the defender faces an overwhelming attacker.

Clearly, the testimony is often ambiguous on the nature of impermissible violence. Personally, I feel the strain of this uncertainty. If it is lawful and sometimes necessary for an officer to enforce common laws with coercion, why should we not allow oppressed peasants to use organized violence in self-defense? Should we enforce traffic laws but not laws of universal human rights?

In attempt to answer these questions, I have tried applying three principles: (1) do not actively harm; (2) do not permit preventable harms; and (3) when these two principles conflict, choose the first unless the harm is (a) clearly preventable, (b) far more severe than the violence done to prevent it, and (c) the perpetrators are utterly unreachable. In other words, I endeavor to reject both active violence and the passive toleration of violence. I make an exception only when an overwhelming amount of evidence suggests that a relatively small act of violence is the only means of preventing a specific harm.

These principles do not, by any means, amount to a just war doctrine. Only in exceptional circumstances do the first and second principles conflict, because

nonviolence can usually avert or mitigate violence. Moreover, any harm prevented through war will not profoundly outweigh the costs of war. The value of life, including humans and the diversity of plants and animals upon the Earth, is almost incalculable. War is the most cataclysmic manifestation of violence, destroying all forms of life on a massive scale. Thus, my principles can never make exception for war.

Must we oppose violence to all degrees?

When Friends oppose various forms of violence, however, it is only clear that they must refrain from actively or directly supporting such violence. Must Friends also avoid all forms of indirect support?

A few Quakers have gone to an extreme, suggesting that all support of violence, no matter how indirect, is unconscionable. Most Friends, though, avoid only non-essential forms of indirect support. Although these Friends try to boycott GE products, they see fit to acknowledge their citizenship, obtain Social Security cards, and pay taxes—all behaviors that contribute to the effectiveness of the U.S. military.

Personally, I have found no solution to this problem. I can only find solace in George Fox's advice to William Penn when Penn asked about the appropriateness of wearing his sword: "I advise thee to wear it as long as thou canst." I try to live my life according to my evolving faith, rejecting forms of indirect support to the extent my conscience demands. For example, I registered for the draft, but I wrote (and photocopied) a note on my card stating my refusal to participate in war. I also try to spend and invest what money I have outside of the war-economy, patronizing cooperatives and alternative businesses.

To whom does my conscience speak?

Quakers have often spoken in universal terms, suggesting that the words of the peace testimony should be followed by all people, in all circumstances, at all times. Howard Brinton (*The Peace Testimony of the Religious Society of Friends*, 1955) spelled out the implications of this view, explaining that Friends have tolerated contrary opinions not "because one opinion can be as true as another," but

since "God's spirit works best in an atmosphere of freedom."

By contrast, many Friends have offered a more subtle, contextualized view. During World War II, D. Elton Trueblood explained in "The Quaker Way," (*Atlantic Monthly*, 1940) that Quakers hold firm convictions, yet do not criticize others for taking up arms once the war has begun:

We continue to be extremely opposed to oppression; we continue to try what seems to us a better way of opposing it; but we are not bound for that reason to condemn those who oppose it in the only way they see that they can.... We shall be making no mistake if we encourage each serious and patriotic group to be loyal to its own vocation.

Personally, I have found that the testimony speaks most clearly to my individual conscience. I am sometimes moved to speak to others, but I prefer to let my actions speak for those who would care to listen. Nonetheless, I believe my testimony does have significance for others, especially those who share my circumstances. I am more comfortable to speak directly to those who share much in common with me—ethnicity, gender, class, nationality. I answer questions anyone might ask, yet I recognize that my conscience is only a partial and often distorted vision. I try to remember that all persons have valuable perspectives—that our testimony is, ultimately, a collective faith, drawing upon different and complementary glimpses of the Light.

Revitalizing the Peace Testimony

If my conscience prods me to speak to anyone, it bids me to speak with fellow Quakers. I suggest that we revitalize our testimony in the manner of Friends. We must reflect upon, if not answer, queries such as those I have put forward. We must engage in searching meditation and solemn speech, rejecting complacent satisfaction and dogmatic proclamations. We must embrace respectful disagreement on matters of violence and war, both during meeting and in open discussions. Most of all we must practice what we believe, for we shall learn the way of peace experimentally, through lived worship.

So long as we mind the Light, our actions and beliefs may differ, but our purpose will remain common. Working together, our testimony will gain the strength it needs to face a new and promising century. □