

Should Quakers Receive The Good Samaritan Into Their Membership?

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ESSAY PRESENTED BY
QUAKER UNIVERSALISTS FELLOWSHIP
1998

THE QUAKER UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP

...is composed of seekers, mainly, but not exclusively members of the Religious Society of Friends. QUF seeks to promote open dialogue on its issues of interest. It writes in its statement of purpose:

While being convinced of the validity of our own religious paths, we not only accept but rejoice that others find validity in their spiritual traditions, whatever they may be. Each of us must find his or her own path, and each of us can benefit for the search of others.

In the selection of both its speakers and manuscripts, QUF tries to implement those ideas.

Editor's Introduction

It is nearly 45 years since Arthur Morgan gave this talk for Friends at the Shrewsbury and Plainfield Half-Yearly Meeting in New Jersey on March 27, 1954. A few months earlier he and Teresina Havens had published similar articles in the *Friends Intelligencer* (now *Friends Journal*). Both of them had argued boldly that the vision of George Fox and the faith of Quakers was broader than the bounds of orthodox Christianity and they had advocated accepting believers in other faiths as members of the Society of Friends. While this was not the first statement of universalist convictions among Friends, it was a particularly forthright one, and it demonstrates that the movement was already gaining ground and defining itself in the mid-1950s.

Powerful as they are, Morgan's words were addressed to another time and another generation, and in some respects they are inevitably dated. But if carefully examined, the differences in his assumptions and attitudes from those of Quaker universalists today can in themselves throw light on how the world, the Society of Friends, and our own hearts have changed in the last half of the 20th century.

One of the most obvious differences to an editor was in the use of language. Women are no longer content to be subsumed in sweeping terms like "mankind" and "brotherhood" which imply that men are the norm for the human race. Those and the exclusive use of masculine pronouns grate on sensitive readers in the 1990s; Therefore I have eliminated sexist language in the confidence that Arthur Morgan himself would have done so if he had been able to update his writing.

Far more subtle is what many liberal Friends today may feel is a pervasive secularism in his point of view. He repeatedly refers to "a way of life" as being the goal of all

religious seeking. Not personal liberation, transcendence, enlightenment, or union with God, not perception of ultimate reality, or a sense of meaning in the universe. His words imply, if they do not directly say, that the purpose of religious life is primarily to lay a basis for ethical behavior and that it can best be advanced through reasoned inquiry. Although such words may have fallen far short of expressing his own spiritual life, they help to explain the fact that for many people “universalism,” and even Quakerism itself, became equated with a rather arid, humanistic approach to worship and with “walking one’s talk” and doing good in the world, but not with listening for inner leadings.

What this brings home to us is the fact that the world – or at least Western society – has been through a profound spiritual upheaval since the 1950s. Today’s universalist Friends have experienced a tide of ideas and powerful spiritual practices from the East together with a rediscovery of Western esoteric and mystical traditions; they have seen science redefine the nature of the universe and its cosmology, including a discovery of the close affinity between modern theories of the universe and mystical experience. They have also been faced with the soul-shattering recognition that human civilization is destroying the natural world which sustains it. Thus they have become seekers in a far more urgent sense than most universalists of an earlier generation, and they seek along paths of experience and intuition as well as intellectual inquiry. No longer do they search only for “something of value” in a variety of religious beliefs and practices; they seek answers to our condition that are more fundamental than those provided by materialist world views and reductionist science.

The urgency expressed in Arthur Morgan’s words related directly to his own times. The early 1950s had seen the lines of the Cold War harden, together with the

dismantling of European colonialism throughout the world, all overshadowed by the new atomic weapons that threatened to bring a nuclear armageddon. Peace was the overriding issue, and hearts and minds in what was then the undeveloped non-Christian world were among the main keys to achieving it. Therefore he quotes Gandhi's statement that because of its divisiveness, orthodox Christianity is "perhaps the greatest impediment" to world peace. And he proposes universalism as an answer.

Although today we still live in the shadow of the mushroom cloud that rose over Hiroshima, nuclear war is no longer the only possibility that makes us tremble. The interdependence and interrelatedness of all humans with each other and with the mysterious web of life that envelops the planet are far more apparent than they were forty-five years ago, and our most deeply held assumptions have been shaken. However, as we look today at the worldwide wave of religious fundamentalism in Christian, Moslem, and other communities, and see the way in which this threatens to divide both the world and the Society of Friends, many of Morgan's insights speak to us with fresh conviction.

Rhoda R. Gilman

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Should Friends receive as members of their fellowship sincere searchers for the truth whose way of life is compatible with that of the Society of Friends but who have had non-Christian religious backgrounds and who are not convinced of the major Christian theological doctrines, such as that Jesus is a deity, was crucified for our sins, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and is the only source of salvation for our sins?

Why should such a question be presented now as of any pressing urgency? Why should not Friends and all Christians go their way, living as best they can according to their traditional lights and where feasible carrying their light to people of other faiths, hoping that the followers of other faiths may come to see the same light they do? This is what Friends and others have been doing for centuries past.

I believe there are cogent and practical reasons for concentrating attention on this issue at the present time. There is general agreement that the foremost practical problem of the world today is that of peace or war. If secure and just peace can be maintained, the world may have time to gradually surmount its difficulties. Everyone today is drawing attention to the dark alternative.

“There is a tide in the affairs of men” which needs to be “taken at the flood,” unless the world is to spend long days “in shallows and in miseries.” There are times when human society is nascent and must take on new patterns; and there are long, long times when the shell of pattern has hardened and can scarcely be broken. Today the world is changing its

pattern. I believe that the manner of handling this matter of membership may have an influence on the outcome.

Throughout their history Friends have had a deep concern for peace. They never have acquiesced in the attitude that because they are few their influence does not count. Peace or war will be the outcome of the attitudes of many people. Friends have felt that they should make such contributions as they can, whether they be large or small. I believe that by the attitude they take on membership, Friends may count significantly for or against the peace and unity of mankind.

It is necessary to realize that one may be acting from what he feels to be right motives and yet may be doing great harm. When Saul, to use the language of the Book of Acts, was “breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord,” even then, as he said later, “I verily thought I was doing God’s service.” Our unexamined feelings are not necessarily true guides to the rightness of our course. I believe Friends should critically examine their feelings on this issue.

Christians, and especially Friends, commonly think of themselves as lovers of peace, and they think of the causes of war as external to themselves. Wars result when people resist what they consider to be servitude or oppression or indignity, or denial of their rightful status. Christians, and especially Friends, believe that such oppression or denial of right is the improper action of other people, but of course not of Christians – and most certainly not of Friends. If only the rest of the world were as committed as we are to good will and peace among people, would not the world indeed find peace?

Now, it is a curious fact that over the whole world most people of other faiths feel the same way about themselves. They are as sure as are the Friends that they want peace and that the causes of war are external to themselves.

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In 1931 my wife and I traveled over much of central and eastern Europe with a large number of introductions to people in various fields. Our mission was trying to find the reason why, with the experience of a terribly disastrous war just behind them, the various nationals could not bury the past and start over again, free from the rigid mind sets that paralyzed productive action, perpetuated estrangements, and were the sure precursors of more war. Everywhere, on all sides of national boundaries, a similar reason was given. On ordinary practical matters, these men and women said, intelligent people can forgive and forget. However, when it comes to matters of principle there can be no compromise. The principles involved seemed to them so fundamental and so obvious that they saw no point in reexamining them.

In their minds these principles were as real as their rivers and mountains, or as the universal law of gravitation. Why, then, one is inclined to ask, if the principles involved have this eternal reality, does not loyalty to them bring people together in unity? As I examined the "principles" to which this intense loyalty was committed, I found that what was fundamental principle on one side of a national boundary, on the other side was considered mistaken prejudice or myth or worse.

For instance, Transylvania, on the border between Hungary and Romania, had been the homeland of Hungarians for many generations. Romanian laborers filtered over the border for farm work, as Mexicans do in California, until they outnumbered the Hungarians, Thereupon there was conflict between the sacred principle of the ancestral homeland and the sacred principle of majority rule. The Versailles Treaty gave the region to Romania. Before these people could actually be at peace they would have to reexamine and actually question the validity of the "fundamental principles" on which their

convictions and emotions were based, or by which they were justified. Yet for them even to think of questioning those sacred principles would give them a sense of disloyalty and guilt.

But what has that to do with present-day Christianity, and especially with Friends, who abjure violence? Surely, they do not set up barriers against peace! Yet the fact is that Christians, sometimes including Friends, do set up just such barriers and will not be moved to take them down until with sincere, open mind they re-examine the “fundamental principles” on which those barriers are based or by which they are justified.

Mahatma Gandhi is generally recognized to have been a sincere man. He gave himself without measure to his people. He renounced hatred and violence and worked by love. He spent much time in considering the merits of Christianity, and in that search had intimate association with numerous devout Christians. Yet, speaking of the fundamental doctrine of orthodox Christianity and of its normal expression in action, he called it, “perhaps the greatest impediment to the world’s progress toward peace.” He spoke, not from general theory, but from immediate, firsthand observation and experience in India and Africa. What Gandhi said in plain language, most of the non-Christian world feels today, and the non-Christian world is the larger part of humanity.

When do we most deeply wound the spirit of people? Not when we take their property or break their bones, but when we discredit or take away the foundation of their faith, or bring it into contempt. It is exactly that which orthodox Christians have done to men and women of other faiths. Christians have held that theirs is the one true faith, the only faith by which people could be saved. In taking that message to others they may act with tact and courtesy,

perhaps working through mission schools or hospitals; yet orthodox Christians, having their belief, are in conscience bound to save the souls of the benighted. How can they do otherwise and yet be true to their convictions? As to nonessentials they may conciliate and adjust, but as to fundamental principles there can be no compromise. Their duty is clear.

The trouble is that non-Christians may also have their own convictions, often as deep and as sure to them as are those of Christians concerning Christian doctrine. For the non-Christian to have his or her own beliefs presented as vain, deluded, or ineffective hurts deeply. When the Christian sings about the non-Christian:

Can we to men benighted, the lamp of life deny?

or

*They call us to deliver
 Their land from guilt and stain;*

the Christian may feel uplifted, but the non-Christian does not. It is to such deep injury that Gandhi referred in saying that the Christian attitude constitutes "perhaps the greatest impediment to the world's progress toward peace."

As compared to other religious beliefs, the convictions of Christians have been expressed in recent years with greater vigor and effectiveness than those of most other faiths, except Communism. The question arises whether that vigor and effectiveness are due chiefly to the nature of the doctrines, or to the particular people who hold them.

In Ethiopia Christianity has been nearly static since the first centuries of the Christian era. Until very recently Christian Ethiopia remained nearly the last center of the slave trade. In the Sudan Christianity controlled for six hundred years, and then peacefully faded away before the greater vigor of Islam. In Egypt a solid Christian population,

after four centuries of dominance, welcomed Islamic rule as an escape from the ecclesiastical tyranny of the Christian church. Syrian Christians, Armenian Christians, and the ancient Christianity of South India have been long quiescent. Apparently there has been nothing inherent in Christianity as such to cause it to keep pure or to spread vigorously. While Western Europe and America have been aggressive in religion, they also have been aggressive in territorial conquest, in political control, and in business. The people of the East see all these activities as expressions of a single pattern of Western aggression.

A native East African told me recently of the humiliation and resentment created among his people by the assumption of Christian missionaries that they bring the one true faith to people living in error. In West Africa that same feeling has been expressed many times. These people commonly look upon the attitude of the orthodox Christian as arrogance and spiritual imperialism. When we think of Christianity we think of an ideal that we know is seldom realized in practice, but which in our minds is a perfect pattern. We judge Islam and other faiths by the most obvious types of practice where those faiths prevail. Non-Christians view Christianity in the way we view their religion. They see military conquest, commercial imperialism, and spiritual arrogance in people whose everyday living leaves much to be desired. As exploitation, imperialism and colonialism are being eliminated from Africa and the East, these non-Christian peoples are determined to end proselytizing also.

Why was China the first non-Christian nation to go Communist? While it is partly because it is near Russia, could it have any relation to the fact that after the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 Americans had more missionaries in China than we had in all the rest of the world combined? Could there be any significance in the fact that in India, in

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Travancore-Cochin, where a larger proportion of the population is Christian than in any other part of India, the Communists are stronger than in any other part of India? It is a curious coincidence that Kenya Colony, which has about as many Quakers as England, is the center of Africa's most violent rebellion against the West.

What might have been the result if during the past two centuries Christian missionaries had gone over the world, not as messengers coming with the one true faith to the heathen, but as mutual searchers for the truth, to discover what other religions have of value to us, and to share what we have with others? What might have resulted if, instead of undertaking to supplant other religions by our own we had gone prepared to respect the indigenous religious cultures, had helped to stabilize them, to learn from them, and to share with them what of value we have? Might we not have made friends of other peoples, and might not Christianity be much richer for the exchange? We may yet have time to change our attitudes and the attitudes of non-Christian peoples toward us before almost complete spiritual alienation takes place.

It is my personal feeling that Christianity at its best has greater value than any of the other great religions, but that most religions, large and small, have values that we might acquire with profit. It is my opinion, too, that the life outlook and teaching of Jesus were very different from the religion which now bears his name. If it should be true that Christians do have the one true faith whereby men may be saved, then perhaps they should keep their present attitudes, though the heavens fall. But what if they are mistaken? Suppose we consider that possibility.

A small proportion of people acquire their major life convictions through a process of intense objective inquiry and reflection. Most of us, on the other hand, get our

underlying convictions chiefly by social inheritance or by the accident of circumstance. Most followers of Islam are born of Moslem parents. The same is true of Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Shintoists and others. Each believes he or she has the one true faith and that others are misled by error. This is a very significant fact, of which we seldom get the full implication .

It is the general policy in each religious faith to endeavor to teach children the essentials of the faith and to surround them with such a climate of indoctrination that they will have no inclination and almost no capacity to question it or to depart from it. This is such an old, deep-rooted tradition in nearly all religions that we accept it as natural, and we do not realize how it may perpetuate error and maintain barriers between peoples. This purpose of indoctrination commonly is furthered by the influences of parents and of the religious community, and in many cases by the prevailing social atmosphere. Where such influences are fairly cumulative, a natural result is that a very strong sense of inner assurance is developed concerning whatever faith is involved. It often is immune to any contrary influence.

The result is illustrated in the saying attributed to the Catholic Church: "Give us a child until it is six, and the world may take it thereafter." That is, an intensive influence during the early years seldom is overcome by later influence or by reflective thinking. (Compare the membership of churches that call for unquestioning acceptance of tradition with those that are the outgrowth of free inquiry.) Quite commonly the natural inclination to inquire is so atrophied that it never re-emerges. As we look within ourselves we realize how there lingers a feeling that it is a sin or a wrong to question. Often some element of the old faith fades away with the years, and persons move from one Christian denomination to another, while the main core of belief

remains. It is true of pagan faiths, as of Christianity, that commonly those who stray away out of indifference or by conversion return to the old faith in time of emergency.

Where this conditioning is intensive and effective, the inner feeling of certainty and assurance that results seems to be deeper than experience or reason and to be independent of them. This feeling is briefly referred to in an editorial in the *Friends Intelligencer* for Seventh Month, 19, 1952: "Friends know, because they have felt in their hearts.... This experience is to them so final that they have little need of abstruse and subtle arguments." (Mention of the doctrine referred to is omitted here because I desire simply to indicate a state of mind which may be induced, or which may exist.)

Similar expressions of inner assurance of having the truth may be found in the literature of many religions and concerning many doctrines, such, for instance, as that the Book of Mormon is divinely inspired. I have personally heard the most sincere and fervent testimony from Roman Catholics, Christian Scientists, Mormons, Moslems, Buddhists, and Communists to the ultimate authority of the inner voice. Many Africans have such inner assurance concerning their own "pagan" faiths. The development of such complete and unquestioning inner assurance is a result aimed at by most religious teaching and religious conditioning in nearly all faiths, and by many people who strive to bring about their own inner conditioning. Much of the teaching of saints and mystics consists of instructions for such self-conditioning.

In view of the fact that this inner feeling of assurance can be, and is, developed with reference to a wide variety of religions and beliefs, some of the beliefs mutually exclusive, it seems to me evident that this inner feeling of certainty is not in itself adequate evidence of the truth of the beliefs to which it is attached. Nearly every religion uses this feeling

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of inner assurance of its own unique truth to fix and intensify the faith of its followers as being different from, and superior to, all others. Until that sense of inner assurance is recognized for what it is, actual inquiry concerning one's faith is difficult or impossible.

The point of these remarks on indoctrination is this: When Christians or Moslems or Hindus or Shintoists come to recognize the nature of this inner assurance, and to see that it is not a unique characteristic of their own faith, or of any particular faith, but can be developed with reference to any faith, they will come to see that theirs is not the one true faith, but that sincere people of all faiths are alike seeking for a way of life, with varying degrees of success. Then they will come to see that all sincere, open-minded people can seek together and travel together as brothers and sisters.

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At the cost of diverting from the main subject, in order to prevent a misconception, I shall say something about conditioning and indoctrination in general. Boys and girls usually take on the principal characters of their lives while young, and before the process of reflective thinking has matured. They take on their attitudes, beliefs and outlooks from their environments by imitation, by teaching, by indoctrination, by example, usually as unconsciously as they learn the mother tongue. It is the business of society, including all the many associations which make up society, by example, teaching, and indoctrination, to pass on to the next generation the finest elements of the inherited culture, that part which of all human inheritance is most precious. If we fail to do that, our children will not remain unindoctrinated or untaught. They will acquire their view

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of life and their manners, beliefs, attitudes and outlooks from casual playmates, from comic strips, radio, television, and by the course of everyday life; and that pattern will be far from the best of our cultural inheritance.

Does this statement nullify everything I have said against indoctrination? I think not. If we examine the great religions of the world we will find that there is a great common core of attitude and of action in which they are in harmony. In Christian literature the general character of this common core may be illustrated by the Sermon on the Mount, in the fifth, sixth and seventh chapters of Matthew, although it would seem that there have been some interpolations which are foreign to the spirit of the whole. A similar way of life is presented by nearly every other great religion, reflecting the longtime conclusions of the spiritual leaders of the race.

So long as the road to free inquiry is left open, this way of life may properly be induced in boys and girls by example, by teaching, by indoctrination, with little danger of its being discredited by mature, critical inquiry. But along with these attitudes that are common to most great religions there are other beliefs, special to the several religions, including theologies, myths and dogmas, which seldom have acceptance beyond the boundaries of the specific faith and which often are mutually antagonistic. Now, a large part of conventional religious indoctrination deals with these controversial doctrines on which there is no semblance of agreement, and concerning most of which there is no clear evidence. Often the more completely without evidence such doctrines are, the more vehemently are they indoctrinated, and the more important are they held to be. Even in America, for instance, the vast amount of time and effort used in inculcating these controversial doctrines very greatly reduces the time and effort given to inculcating the universals of

religion such as those presented in the general spirit of the Sermon on the Mount.

The general answer to the problem of religious indoctrination is this: Indoctrinate in the universals of world religion, by word, but more especially by example. As to highly controversial doctrines, if they are presented at all, it should be as tentative beliefs or opinions, to be examined critically as maturity and competence make possible. At all times keep open the road of sincere, free inquiry. (So much for a digression from the main theme.)

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Aside from the issue of war and peace, there is another reason for the concern of many Friends that membership in the Society shall not be conditioned on acceptance of the core of Christian theology. There are in this country many men and women who see Christian theological doctrine as but one of the world's great religious myths and who yet are deeply concerned for meaning and direction for their lives, and who would like to have their children more at home in the best ethical and spiritual traditions of the great religions. If Friends should welcome such in membership they might be opening the way to a spiritual unity that many are seeking.

Perhaps it is time for us to have a new experience, such as Peter had. A born Jew, with a Jewish back ground, he was invited to visit a Roman gentile. After great mental stress, he went, and said to his pagan host:

Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath showed me that I should not call any man common or unclean.... Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that

*feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is
 accepted with him.*

That was a turbulent adjustment for Peter to make. Is the lesson for us that Peter's was the last change of attitude men would be called to make, and that henceforth belief and the basis of fellowship would be unchanging; or was it an example of the kind of change of outlook men are called upon to make again and again, as they travel toward the light?

Jesus broke the fetters of both Hebrew and Greek orthodoxy and won a new freedom, just as Buddha had broken the fatalistic wheel of Hinduism five centuries before. Martin Luther broke the bonds of a decadent religious dictatorship and won freedom to worship according to his conscience. George Fox broke the rigid and confining bonds of the Church of England for a new spiritual freedom. Mahatma Gandhi broke the confining traditions of Hinduism and helped free it to a larger pattern. He was forever growing and changing. Yet within five years of his death some of his followers are freezing his teaching into the particular last position he had before he died. In that they are not following him but are denying him.

To stop where the great spiritual pioneers stopped is to betray their spirits. It is not where they stopped that calls for our loyalty, but the spirit in which they lived and worked, including their willingness, when necessary, to break old patterns and to make new ones. I believe that all of the great world religions have limitations, through philosophy or tradition, which quite certainly stops any one of them from being the faith and fellowship in which mankind can find an inclusive basis for unity. Considerable time may pass before a pattern for such unity shall emerge. Just as the Society of Friends was prepared for by a century of free "searchers" in England, and just as any great human

advance is foreshadowed by long and gradual approach, may not the Society of Friends help clear the way for an inclusive fellowship of free and sincere spirits by receiving into fellowship and membership sincere searchers for a way of life whose ways are compatible with those of Friends regardless of the religious tradition by which they have come and without asking that they adopt the orthodox Christian theology?

Notwithstanding that most people inherit their convictions without testing and examining them, there do occur in all lands individuals and small groups who, sometimes through much stress of spirit, have broken from traditional limiting dogmas and have sought freely and sincerely for a way of life. For instance, a Friend from a very orthodox yearly meeting who has been working in Egypt told me that he knew of serious young Egyptians who saw the inadequacy of Islam and who longed for a larger fellowship but to whom Christianity was just another of the religions of the past. This Friend said that these young men would gladly welcome fellowship with other people of free spirit who were in search of a way of life. I have met a number of such persons in India.

Where non-Christians have broken from their ancestral pattern, not because they have adopted the basic Christian orthodoxy, but because they seek a more inclusive fellowship in the search for truth, they tend to be unattached and homeless. Yet they may be deeply committed to those universals of conviction to which nearly all great religions are committed, and of which the Golden Rule is a typical example. Can we extend them full fellowship, or must they, so far as Friends are concerned, continue without association?

I do not speak for "quietism," an attitude that has sometimes characterized the Society of Friends. Respect for

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the beliefs of others should not be the reason or the occasion for withdrawing into ourselves. The day is past when different peoples can live to themselves. We are interrelated, and we are bound to communicate. Either that communication will be as friends, sisters, and brothers facing the world together in the quest of truth and of the good life, or it will eventuate in communication by means of atom bombs and other instrumentalities of like purpose.

In the original sense of the word we should be evangelists, carriers of the good news. And what is that "good news"? Is it not that we are brothers and sisters, with an equality of status in our search for a good way of life, and that none of us can claim to have "the only true faith" which others must accept in order to enter into that fellowship of life and hope? It seems to me that the term "quietism" would be more appropriate to those who would withdraw or remain withdrawn in limited associations of belief while the world is anxiously searching for the grounds of unity.

Should Quakers receive the Good Samaritan into membership? Yes, if his or her life is consistent with the action in the parable. And in many cases the life is consistent, whether it be the life of Samaritan, Moslem, Buddhist, Confucian or "pagan" animist in Africa.

About The Author

Arthur E. Morgan was among the most influential Quakers of his time. Raised a Baptist, he joined the Unitarians, and after marrying a Quaker woman, he became a Friend, remaining one until his death in 1975. Although trained as an engineer, he developed strong interests in both education and world affairs. At the close of World War I he served as a charter member and first secretary of the League to Enforce Peace an ideological precursor of the League of Nations. In 1921 he was named president of Antioch College, and in the 1930s he launched and directed the Tennessee Valley Authority, which brought electricity and social services to the impoverished rural South. In 1938 he joined with Clarence Pickett and other Quakers in founding the Celo Community in North Carolina. One of his last crusades was a long but unsuccessful struggle to preserve the reservation and communities of the Seneca Indians from destruction by the Kinzua Dam in the 1960s.