

Disobedient Friends

Nonviolence has many forms and labels... passive resistance, nonviolent direct action, pacifism, conscientious objection, fasting, civil disobedience. Each by itself deserves a Program Hour. Today we consider civil disobedience, which is when we refuse to obey a demand or restriction by the State that conflicts with higher law and conscience. The act requires that the disobedient one accept whatever may be the consequences of refusing...imprisonment, moral condemnation, fines, even perhaps death. It should be done when one's spiritual searching and sense of rightness permit no other response. Over the centuries, disobedient Friends and nonviolent luminaries such as Thoreau and Gandhi have eloquently shown present day conscientious law-breakers how to suffer for one's convictions at the hands of the State.

Early English Quakers were disobedient indeed, refusing to bear arms, to remove hats in the royal presence, to testify under oath, to pay war taxes, to worship inside the established church. Following the Conventicle Act of 1668, traveling Quaker leaders and their followers were often arrested and imprisoned for their convictions. Still they persisted in spreading the Light. Between 1660 and 1680, an estimated one-tenth of the growing Quaker flock was in prison. Thus did Friends become all too familiar with the degradation of prison life and "Meetings for Sufferings" were formed to support them.

As Quakers spread their word to colonial America, they ran afoul of Puritan laws in Massachusetts. In the 1650s, Quaker missionaries were banished and threatened with death if they returned. They often did so. Mary Dyer and three other Friends were hanged in Boston in 1659. In 1661, the General Assembly passed the "Cart and Whip Act" which had Quakers carted to the colony's border with whippings in each village along the way.

In Pennsylvania, the laws were made within William Penn's "Frame of Government" (model for the later American constitution) so religious freedom was not an issue. But as Friends gradually lost control of the colony through the 18th-century, they came increasingly into conflict with government over military taxes, capital punishment, and Indian relations. The American Revolution presented Friends with new challenges. While many individual Friends fell away to support the independence movement, Quaker meetings, despite internal divisions, generally remained firmly against revolution. The Peace Testimony urged Friends to remain strictly neutral, involved with neither side: voting, office-holding, arms-bearing or hiring substitutes, paying military taxes, provisioning or accepting compensation for goods requisitioned, using Continental Currency, loyalty oaths...all were forbidden. Thus were Meetings for Sufferings very active during the revolutionary period as Friends suffered fines, imprisonment, exile, and confiscation of property.

Historically, refusal to bear arms was a constant form of civil disobedience for Friends. During World War I, the American and British governments were still imprisoning Quaker objectors. But the recognition of the right to religious exemption and alternative service was developing. Decades earlier, Tolstoy had persuaded the Tsar to permit the migration of the pacifist Dukhobors from Russia to Canada to avoid conscription. During the war, the newly-created Friends Ambulance Unit and American Friends Service Committee channeled COs into war relief. The AFSC led the creation of the Civilian Public Service Camps during World War II, when 12,000 objectors did difficult service as smoke jumpers, experimental medical subjects and mental hospital workers. These Quaker efforts to help government deal constructively with objectors of conscience enabled me and many others in the 1960s to do alternative service of various kinds sanctioned by the Selective Service System. In fact, the Peace Corps, conceived in part as an alternative to military service, was modeled after the AFSC's VISA program. Still others among us came to their moral refusal while in military service and were not as well treated by the government.

Friends' belief in the human right to value and protect that of God in another has led them to disobey Man's law in many ways. Thus did Levi Coffin deny the Fugitive Slave Act to hide runaway slaves, Susan B. Anthony invade the polling place to cast her illegal ballot, Earl and Barbara Reynolds sail the Golden Rule into the atomic testing zone in the Pacific and later the Phoenix with medical supplies to North Vietnam, and Boulder Friends to sit on the tracks at Rocky Flats in the 70s and harbor Central American refugees in the 80s.

There would probably be more Friendly civil disobedience if Quakers were not so inventive of other ways to confront violence, to seek and speak to that of God in all. Quaker leanings and leadings toward gender and racial equality, prison reform, abolition of capital punishment, alternatives to military conscription have constantly nudged society toward its humane and egalitarian potential. And Friends' inclination toward contemplation, listening and consensus lead us more often toward collaboration than confrontation. But on occasion, confront we must, all the while considering the humanity and worth of our opponent.

Let's hear now from some Disobedient Friends.

Paul Wehr

Recommended reading:

Meeting Library

Barbour and Frost, The Quakers.

Wehr Homepage: socsci.colorado.edu/~wehr/index.html

Downton and Wehr, "Persistent Pacifism."

Thoreau, H.D., Civil Disobedience.

Tolstoy, Leo, Conscientious Objectors.

Wehr, Paul, "Toward a History of Nonviolence."