



COUNTERPOINT by Esther Mürer

The Arts in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice*

The new Philadelphia Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice* is now out. It is a rich resource, the depths of which cannot be plumbed in a short time. Nevertheless I venture some preliminary observations on its treatment of the arts.

My impression so far is that, the extracts aside, the new *Faith and Practice* does not go beyond the 1972 version in acknowledging the validity of the arts as ministry. It would take quite some contortions to find a place for the arts in, for example, the section on "Concerns and Leadings" (p.65 ff).

The new version does make a passing reference to the value of arts as family recreation:

Family recreation should promote restoration, solidarity, and spiritual well-being; it should bring balance into life and contribute to wholeness of personality. Such recreation includes reading aloud, gardening, music, and arts and crafts as well as games and sports. All such activities develop fellowship within the familyRecreational activities should stress cooperation and inclusiveness, and should resist the materialism of our culture. (p 71)

By contrast, the 1972 version treats recreation as a separate topic, not subsumed under family life:

Simplicity directs the individual to choose those forms of recreation that rest and build up the body, that refresh and enrich mind and spirit. One should consider the proper expenditure of time, money and strength, the moral and physical welfare of others as well as oneself. Healthful recreation includes games, sports and other physical exercise; gardening and the study and enjoyment of nature; travel; books; the fellowship of friends and family; and the arts and handicrafts which bring creative self-expression and appreciation of beauty. Recreations in which one is a participant rather than merely a spectator are particularly beneficial. (p 20)

Whatever one may think of the change in emphasis, both versions represent a decided advance over the kind of thing one finds in 19th-century disciplines:

1806: As our time passeth swiftly away, and our delight ought to be in the law of the Lord; it is advised that a watchful care be exercised over our youth, to prevent their going to stage-plays, horse-races, music, dancing, or any such vain sports and pastimes....

1873 (Orhodox): We would renewedly caution all our members against indulging in music, or having instruments of music in their houses, believing that the practice tends to promote a light and vain mind....It becomes us to be living as strangers and pilgrims on earth, seeking a better country, and to be diligently using [our time] for the great end for which it is lent to us..., and not in vain amusements or

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corrupting pleasures, but striving that 'whether we eat or drink, or whatsoever we do, we may do all to the glory of God...'

....all, apparently, except making music. In fairness it should be pointed out that Quakers didn't have a monopoly on this attitude. A Universalist hymnal published in the same year as the last quotation contains a hymn with the lines:

Will ye play, then, will ye dally
With your music and your wine?
Up! it is th'Almighty's rally:
God's own arm hath need of thine!

Here is a task for present and future generations of Quaker artists: to bring our religious community to the point of realizing that arts as ministry is worth making a corporate statement about.

And yet I realize with some awe that the *form* of *Faith and Practice* itself has evolved in a direction which makes room for intimations and concerns which are in advance of the general leading. The section of extracts from Friends' writings--originally limited to corporate minutes--has in this century come to include quotations from the writings of individual Friends.

We must acknowledge the danger that this trend may be a function of our increasing corruption by the ideology of individualism. At the same time we can marvel at how a native Quaker form has organically evolved a way of accommodating new life growing up through the cracks in the Quaker sidewalk.

Oddly enough, while the extracts in the 1972 version had nothing specifically *about* the arts, the sections on belief, the scriptures, worship and ministry, brotherhood, the individual and the state, death and bereavement, and nature all included extracts in poetic form--by John Greenleaf Whittier, Kenneth Boulding, and Mary Hoxie Jones.

The new version, by contrast, has no poetry at all. But it does have the topic "art" in the index, listing the two extracts reproduced above--one from a statement by FQA's own Janet Mustin at the opening of the new crafts studio at Pendle Hill in 1992, and the other from John Ormerod Greenwood's classic Swarthmore Lecture, *Signs of Life*. And powerful extracts they are.

The new *Faith and Practice* will take--and richly reward--a lot of living with. Much as I long to see more space given to recognizing the spiritual value of the arts, I suggest that an essential standard, without which any amount of talk *about* the arts would be meaningless, is the one articulated by T.S. Eliot in his essay "The Idea of a Christian Society:"

Good prose cannot be written by a people without convictions.

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