

Convergent Friends: An Introduction

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There has been a great deal of murmurs the conversation entitled “Convergent Friends.” When I first heard of the conversation, I had received an email from one of the conversationalists telling me that I was a convergent Friend. Therefore if I was interested in joining the conversation at some point I was welcomed. Taken a back by the forthrightness of the invitation and consequent labeling, I rolled my eyes thinking ‘here is another faction of Quakerism trying to assert its righteousness. I am not taking on any more labels or commitment.’ Therefore I did not reply to the email at that time. About five months later, faced with a required project in my Contemporary Religious Movements class at Earlham College, an intrigue in the conversation was born. I began researching.

Main Conversationalists:

Robin and Chris Mohr:

Robin and her husband Chris, avid bloggers, are part of Pacific Yearly Meeting. Robin coined the term ‘Convergent Friends’ after hearing elongated hyphenated labels, for example “liberal-unprogrammed-evangelical-postmodern-Quaker.” Hoping to get to the root of the hyphenated labels, Robin’s ‘Convergent Friends’ term is an allusion to the connections between the Conservative branch of Friends (Conserving the ‘old’ ways) and the Emergent Church.

On her blog she defines Convergent Friends as describing “Friends who are seeking a deeper understanding of our Quaker heritage and a more authentic life in the kingdom of God on Earth, radically inclusive of all who seek to live this life. It includes among others, Friends from the politically liberal end of the evangelical branch and from the Christian end of the unprogrammed branch.”

C. Wess Daniels:

Wess is a Doctorate student at Fuller Theological Seminary. Wess is one of the central producers of academic literature on the emergence and development of Convergent Friends. He spent his undergraduate years at Malone College where he was a youth pastor for Barberton Evangelical Friends Church for a period of time. This experience brought him into Quakerism and from there he has studied the potential and existent relationships between Quakerism and the Emergent Church. Wess and his wife Emily are part of the Evangelical Friends Church Eastern Region.

Martin Kelley:

Member of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting is a professional webmaster. Martin is the host of quakerquaker.org, a blogging network. In addition to working for a variety of Quaker organizations, Martin uses his network to bring into conversation a huge variety of voices.

A few other key voices:

Liz Oppenheimer from Northern Yearly Meeting

David Male from Ohio Yearly Meeting Conservative

Shawna and Kevin Roberts from Ohio Yearly Meeting Conservative

My own location:

My name is Rachel Stacy. I am a member of Gunpowder Friends Meeting, Baltimore Yearly Meeting, and I live in Baltimore, Maryland. I graduated from Earlham College with a degree in Chemistry, and a degree in Religion. My religion thesis was titled: Divine Infinity: A Mathematical Discourse on the Existence of God. I have also taken classes at the Earlham School of Religion. Currently I am teaching high school chemistry and physics in Baltimore County Public Schools.

History and Background

Modernity and Quakerism:

Both Modernity and Quakerism began around the same time. Modernity is marked by the age of the Enlightenment, Scientific Revolution and the Dawn of Rationalism. Beginning in Italy and moving north through France, Germany and Britain, the Enlightenment is marked by a change in the beliefs and attitudes concerning the laws of nature. Descartes is a prominent figure of the Enlightenment and often used to show the beginning of rationalistic thought. Initially Friends held a delicate tension between their experiences with scripture and their direct experiences with the Divine. This balance along with the spark and enthusiasm of Quakerism in its early days (mid 1600's) was quickly tipped and muted by modernity in the late 1600's.

Conflicts surfaced between scientific and religious authority because of the development of new perspectives on the laws of nature. The church responded to this conflict by requiring allegiance to strict biblical interpretation of the lessons for morals and actions; rejecting any claims of authority within the religious experience. Modernity caused a "severing of orthopraxis (right-practices) and orthodoxy (right teachings)." (Daniels, QL 2006). Over the years, Modernity grew into a state promoting anti-tradition, anti-community and pro-individualistic thought. Communities separated their church lives from their secular lives so that they could participate both in the emerging rationalistic culture and explore their spirituality and moral authority. Quakerism, along with many other religious traditions, experienced several major splits

in its communities because of disagreements over authority and the balance of church and state.

Post Modernity and the Emergent Church:

Modernity started to fall apart at the beginning of the 20th century although most say that modernity ended in the 1960's. With similar regards to the ambiguity and disagreement of the dates surrounding the Enlightenment and Modernity, cultural characteristics rather than specific dates mark Post-modernity.

'The Church,' an entity describing the Christian community and place of worship, no longer related to the present culture. At the turn of the 20th century, The Church found itself in danger of irrelevance. Churches tried to solve this problem of detachment from culture by setting up youth churches, churches-within a church, and other services that would appeal to the sensory oriented culture of the technology revolution (around the 1990's). However, these methods were not sustainable and often resulted in the youth contingent leaving the specific denomination and setting up a new church.

The Emergent Church is a movement in response to the failure of the churches to address the problems of modernity. The Emergent Church hopes to engage contemporary United States culture and Christianity in a relationship. The Emergent Church, which uses some post-modern theory and some post-post-modern theory, offers a way of living Christianity that can be explored from any Christian denominational view. Specifically, the Emergent Church is made up of people, regardless of generational affinity who tend to encompass the following 9 practices (Gibbs & Bolger 45):

1. *Identify with Jesus*: This history of Christianity is not thrown out by this practice and belief. However, the emphasis within Christianity is refocused on to the life and teachings of Jesus and subsequently salvation through discipleship. Followers are saved through their experiences as a follower of Christ, compared to other practices where people are saved first and then taught to be disciples.
2. *Transform Secular realm*: Every day is a holy day. The Emergent Church holds the belief that the separation of science and religion, of everyday life and church Sundays, of the secular and the sacred should be overcome. The disciple's responsibility to Christ is to live into the Kingdom of God. Doing justice means knowing God. Living faithfully is embodying God.
3. *Live highly communal lives*: Living in community is a fundamental principle of Quakerism, however, the Emergent Church decentralizes the church. Sunday is no longer the center of the religious experience. Often Emergent Church communities are made up of small cell churches or groups that meet in community centers, bars, restaurants or homes. Religious communities keep each other accountable and support each other sometimes even financially. 'The Church' is a way of live and a community of people interacting with the larger community rather than a building or a day of the week.

***Note: The first three elements are consistently evident among Emergent Church groups; the next six are frequently evident in groups in some sort of combination.*

4. *Welcome the stranger*: Radical hospitality
5. *Serve with generosity*: Generous service
6. *Participate as producers*: Priesthood for all
7. *Created as created beings*: Emphasis on creativity
8. *Lead as a body*: Equality and servant leadership
9. *Take part in spiritual activities*: Peace and Justice work are central spiritual activities (Gibbs & Bolger 45)

While the church style of modernity was forward looking and emphasized salvation as necessary for a heavenly future, the Emergent Church emphasizes an inward direction. Similar to Friends who believed that the Kingdom of Christ was here now on earth, the Emergent Church stresses the necessity to live into the Kingdom of Christ, not live for the day of Jesus' return.

However, one thing that fascinates me about the Emergent Church theology, is that in contrast to modernity that that looked at life as a series of polar opposites: good and evil, science and religion, sacred and secular, church and state etc... the Emergent Church theology beings the exploration of paradoxes. There appears to be an emphasis to live out of the paradoxical tensions existent in current culture and current theology. Using a Quaker scene as an example, in business meeting, the tension between the discernments of the individual and of the community result in a discernment that is not of either but somehow grew out of that tension. Therefore the resolution of paradoxes is not the goal, but the product that exists within the tension those paradoxes creates.

Convergent Friends:

History/Overview:

Convergent Friends is a evolving idea, conversation and community that initially got its grounding on the Internet, in particular in the blogging community. However, the conversation and emphasis of the conversation is not about online outreach. The emphasis is local, national, and global relationships that foster the building and edification of the Kingdom. Each member of the conversation has their own leadings, own ministry, and own place in the building and edification of the Kingdom. Nevertheless, the Internet does facilitate the growing relationships particularly because the members of the conversation are so spread out geographically.

After forming the discussion on the blogs, Friends who were already planning to attend Quaker Heritage Day at Berkeley Friend Church, San Francisco, decided to meet together in person. The online community blossomed into a physical community. (Spring, 2006) From there, Wess Daniels published an article about Convergent Friends in Quaker

Life, and Robin Mohr and Martin Kelley published articles in Friends Journal. (Summer/Fall 2006) As more people begun to discover the Convergent Friend conversation, David Male, from Ohio YM Conservative, who is on the planning committee for the annual gathering of FWCC (Friends World Committee for Consultation) Section of Americas, asked Robin, Wess, David and Shawna Roberts (also from Ohio YM Conservative) to lead a workshop at the annual gathering in Providence, Rhode Island.

Since the FWCC workshop more and more blog responses and articles are circling around the Quaker community. I started this research with the journal articles and a few blog entries and by the time I was finished (about a month later) over a hundred pages of blog responses and further articles were published. Although is still a relatively small quantity of literature on the subject, the conversation is growing. There are a few yearly meetings, including Ohio Yearly Meeting Conservative who plans to hold workshops that continue the Convergent conversation.

Theology of Convergent Friends:

So what is the theology behind the Convergent Friends conversation? To preface, there is a general reluctance to define this conversation to a particular movement or theology. Informed and influenced greatly by the theology of the Emergent Church and post-modern theory, the conversation is developing several evolving trends.

There is a general desire to engage with contemporary culture with a missionary focus. The mission work is to live into the Kingdom of God. Jesus is the focus over classic “Christianity.” Unlike other denominations who evangelize by door knowing and revivals, the conversation has been encouraging a type of missionary work that is based on personal and communal witness to beliefs. Similar to many of the views of early Quakers, Convergent Friends desire to ‘let their lives speak’ for their views.

There is a distinct Christian focus to the conversation. Parts of this focus come from the Christianity of Emergent Church theology, the Christianity evident in Conservative Quakerism, and the Christianity of the conversationalists. The wonderful world of Quakerism is experiencing its own trends in favor and in rejection of Christian language and beliefs. While some Friends are experiencing for the first time a chance to use their Christian language, other Friends feel threatened by the over emphasis on Jesus. In general, I think that the Convergent Friend conversation is fascinated by the apparent connections between Quakerism and the Emergent Church and the challenge of living an authentic and radical discipleship in contemporary culture. However, as I stated earlier are trends that are emerging and evolving.

Myths:

Liz Oppenheimer wrote an article, on her blog, addressing the ‘myths’ surrounding the Convergent Friend conversation. In addition to the concern that this is an internet based movement, Liz addressed several other concerns including: Are

Convergent Friends an emergence of a ‘new type of Quaker?’ and the relationship between Non-Theists and Convergent Friends.

First, Convergent Friends are not a ‘new type of Quaker.’ Some other ‘convergent’ groups within Quakers would include, FWCC, any of the Quaker colleges that bring together in conversation a diversity of theologies, Pendle Hill and Woodbrooke, The World Gatherings of Friends, Quaker Women’s Theology Conference, Quaker Life and Friends Journal, Quakers United in Publications...etc. Convergent Friends, consistent with the Emergent Church ideas, encourages people of different beliefs to commune and challenge each other to live more faithfully.

Although there have been few authors and members of academia present in the conversation; in particular looking at the relationship between Quakerism and postmodern culture; the convergent Friends conversation offers a new topic for scholarship and research. I have some concern that academia does not desire to pick up the theological questions of the Convergent Friend conversation. My own Quaker college and seminary owned one book on the Emergent Church and had one professor who was interested in post-modern theory, but not Emergent Church theology. I am encouraged by what is coming out from Wess Daniels and the other conversationalists. The community holds each other accountable for articulating the explorations of the conversation. Perhaps the research of the relationship between the Emergent Church, contemporary culture and Quakerism will be the focus of some new innovated research and publications.

Christians vs. Non-Theists

The most vocal opposition to the Convergent Friend conversation comes from Quaker non-theists. Non-theist Quakers are “Friends (Quakers) who are more concerned with the natural than the supernatural. [They] understand “God” as a symbol of human values and...avoid the concept [of defining God] while accepting it as significant to others. [They] differ greatly in...religious experience and in the meaning [they] give religious terms.” (nontheistfriends.org) In fact, non-theist Friends differ greatly in the meaning that they give non-theism. Another definition I have pieced together is the one that I will base my discussion of non-theist and convergent Friends. Non-theism is belief that to use God language or talk of the existence of God confines God to human perception of existence. God is infinite and therefore beyond the human perception of existence. To speak of God is relational is forming a false image of God, an idol perhaps.

In this sense, non-theism could be referred to as post-Christian, or post-denominational. Several of the non-theist pieces I have read explore spirituality consistent to the universalism of the Enlightenment; they see science as projecting their theology beyond the confines of present theological constructions. They do not use Christian language, nor identify as Christian. However, I argue that they are still formable conversationalists of Convergent Quakerism.

Non-theists are concerned that the Convergent Friends conversation is attempting to nudge non-theists out of Quakerism. This concern is based primarily on the fact that

the Convergent Friend conversation is predominately Jesus based or Christian in language. Convergent Friends say online that they are not all Christians, however I have yet to meet a Convergent Friend who is not. Convergent Friends affirm and welcome the presence of the diversity of Quakerism at the conversation table but refuse to soften up their Christian language or their Christian message when they talk.

I can understand the Non-theist fear of this conversation because of the Christian roots evident in Quakerism. I do not believe that non-theist Friends are Convergent Friends, but that does not mean that they are 'divergent' Friends. The Jesus-Christian language and message of the Convergent (remember this a marriage between the Conservative Friends and the Emergent Church) is focused on living into the Kingdom of God, while non-theist Friends are interested in exploring a relationship with a entity, a being beyond our rational understanding. How can these two theologies converse?

In the Emergent Church theology there is a general fascination concerning God's role in creativity and paradoxes. I completed my undergraduate thesis on the exploration of a type of Infinity Theology that looked a series of paradoxes including the existence of a relational (infinitesimal) and omnipotent (infinite) God and the infinite creation of new ideas (Creativity) from a finite mind. I state that both non-theists and convergent Friends are exploring how to live in this world but not of it and could have a great deal to work with concerning topics that include but are not limited to infinity, relationality, paradoxes, and creativity.

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