

If the church were Christian, personal exploration would be more important than communal uniformity.

Every summer, we camp with friends at West Boggs Park in southern Indiana. It's located in the midst of a large Amish population. In the heat of the day, I get in my air-conditioned car and drive the back roads, watching the Amish perspire. I'm not sure how they tell one another apart. They dress the same, the men all cut their hair the same way, with hedge clippers. Their houses all look the same. Their buggies are all the same. That's the part that would confuse me. Going to an Amish football game or Amish rock concert, then coming out and trying to find the right buggy.

We've romanticized the Amish and tend to look at them wistfully, especially when our own lives are hectic and complex. Then we want to live like the Amish. Well, Quakers did for awhile. In fact, a good part of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were spent adhering to dress and social codes and kicking out those Friends who had the audacity to have lapels on their jackets, attend the theater, marry a non-Quaker, visit a different church, join the Masons, play the piano, or forget to say *Thee* or *Thou*.

Last month, I was speaking with Arthur Larrabee, the General Secretary of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, who said that in a 21 year period, from 1755 to 1776, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting disfellowshipped 3,157 of its 15,000 members. It eventually occurred to us that kicking out 20% of our members was a poor way to spread Quakerism and we stopped, but not before giving the heave-ho to tens of thousands of Quakers, who promptly joined other denominations, inspiring one of the more common sayings heard by Quakers today, usually voiced by Methodists—“Hey, my ancestors were Quakers.” Well, yes...

I want to talk today about communal uniformity, the tendency of religions to enforce a standard of conduct or appearance so that all its participants look alike, act alike, and think alike. This tendency toward conformity happens in all religions and transcends theological boundaries. If every sign from every building devoted to religious exercises were removed, we could still discern by their clothing whether the worshippers were Sikh, Muslim, Jewish, Pentecostal, or Unitarian. If we were to stay and listen to the message, it would become clear there was an expected pattern of behavior. But here’s the problem—in all religions, even Quakerism, conformity and uniformity become more important than our spiritual growth and our willingness to love. Indeed, as long as people conform to the standards, they are still considered a credit to their religion, even if their behavior is ungracious.

There is an American legal scholar named Cass Sunstein. He's written a book called *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide*, in which he describes an experiment he conducted where he asked liberals and conservatives to write down their thoughts on a variety of hot-button topics—abortion, same gender marriage, war. He then divided them into like-minded groups—liberals in one group, conservatives in the other—and had them talk about their beliefs for 15 minutes. After the discussions with like-minded people, both groups were more rigid and unbending in their views. It's called "group polarization." Religions have long known this—if you want to make someone conform to a religion, you should promote suspicion of nonmembers, urge them to spend time with like-minded people, and forbid them from being unequally yoked. Does that sound familiar? Before long, you'll have a true believer on your hands. But that always comes at the expense of grace, enlightenment, and personal growth.

If the church were Christian, personal exploration would be valued more than communal uniformity. Let me tell you what I mean by that by talking about the difference between propaganda and reality.

Propaganda is when someone in an organization, usually a long time ago, has determined the party line, and if you're a member of that

particular community, you have to pledge your allegiance to the party line, to the dogma, to the doctrine. Or you get labeled and pretty soon you're out. We have all kinds of names for people who don't conform to community expectations. If the community is a church, you're a heretic. If it's a nation, you're a traitor or a turncoat. If you're a difficult teenager, you're labeled a deviant. So you conform, or you're out. Unhealthy religions label and exclude. They trade in propaganda and the party line and don't make room for folks who are different-minded.

Conversely, healthy religions are committed to reality and the search for truth. They are dedicated to the growth of the individual. Healthy religions create environments in which people are free to think, speak, doubt, question, affirm, challenge, and change.

A wonderful example of healthy religion creating environments where people can question, challenge, and change is found in Matthew's gospel, in what is popularly called the Sermon on the Mount. These are the collected sayings of Jesus, probably taught over a period of several years, then gathered and assembled by Matthew, or whoever wrote Matthew, into a collection of sayings which were then placed in this setting. It was a literary device. Jesus giving the law on a mountain, a new Moses.

What does Jesus say in there? What is the central phrase in that sermon? “You have it said...but I say...” Remember those sayings? “You have heard it said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.” That’s one of them. You can read the others in the fifth chapter of Matthew’s gospel.

If Jesus had been interested in communal uniformity, he would never have said that. He would have said, “Here’s what we’ve been taught by our elders. This is the tradition. This is what our community believes. This is what has been said, so do it.” Instead, he challenged the tradition, the doctrine, the dogma, and described an alternative way of living. “You have it heard it said..., but I say...” So Jesus challenged communal uniformity and affirmed the individual’s responsibility to raise the ethical bar, and seek a higher truth.

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Have a friend who grew up in the church. His father was a minister, so my friend lived and breathed the church. Couldn’t go to movies, had to keep his hair cut short, women couldn’t wear jewelry kind

of church. The whole nine yards. Got himself saved. Several times. Every year. Then he hit his mid-20's and began reading and thinking and asking questions. They were good questions. "How could the earth be only 6,000 years-old?" "Why are people like us the only ones going to heaven?" "Why did God require someone to die so we could be forgiven?" Those are good questions, but by then he was a pastor, which made it awkward. Pastors ought to have the good sense not to change their minds about God. Before long, he was in trouble. He loved the church, he just had questions. The elders in his church told him, "You keep asking these questions, you'll have to leave." But how can you stop?

He told me he was looking for another church. I invited him to become a Quaker. He was going to, then he asked me, "Will I get in trouble for my theology?" Boy, we almost had him. We were that close. He became a Unitarian minister instead. People visit his church, more every week, asking questions, thinking, growing, broadening their minds, expanding their hearts. It's a sight to behold, when personal exploration is valued above communal uniformity, when people's best thoughts are seen as gifts instead of threats, when people are urged to love God not just with their hearts and souls, but with their minds.

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