

Friends and the Flag*

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Historically, a Quaker meetinghouse is austere, plain, the very absence of crosses, stained glass, pulpits, and other traditional religious symbols and decorations speaking volumes about central principles of the Religious Society of Friends. At the heart of spiritual reality for Friends is the experience of the living Presence of God (also referred to as the Light of Christ, the Inward Light, the Seed, or “that of God”), leading, guiding, and directing, making unnecessary for Friends any physical symbols of that Reality.

A symbol is a material object which represents something immaterial. The Quaker experience of God’s Spirit, of the Presence of Christ, in their silent worship and in their daily lives renders insufficient and redundant the use of symbols, as the Real is directly accessible.

This is most clearly seen in Quaker attitudes about the symbol of the Lord’s Supper, which is not observed in its outward form in Quaker worship. In Protestant worship, Communion symbolizes the Presence of Christ or recalls Christ in the historical Jesus. In Quaker thought, Christ is present as teacher, priest, prophet, and Redeemer. Friends commune with that Real Presence in their silent worship, learn from it, and are empowered by it to harmonize their lives around God’s guidance. No outward form or symbol is necessary, as the Real is directly experienced.

So, what does this have to do with Friends and the flag? Everything.

Friends have a long tradition of eschewing the symbolic in favor of direct experience of that which others symbolize. For many Friends, this theological concept carries over into attitudes about secular symbols such as the flag. If the flag as symbol represents immaterial values, what are they?

We are told that those values include, among others, freedom, religious pluralism, democracy, respect for human dignity, and hope for the oppressed. Friends seek to incorporate those values into their lives rather than represent them in a symbol. Guilford College has long chosen to live those values in its campus culture rather than represent them by flying the flag of the United States on campus. Where the US flag is displayed at Guilford, it is displayed (in the Ragan-Brown Fieldhouse) along with the flag of the United Nations. Other flags of the countries from which our students come are displayed electronically in the Hege Library.

What many Friends fear now is that US citizens are being called out of patriotic impulse to display the flag for reasons that do not articulate the important principles the flag represents. At this time, the flag is being displayed as a sign: an indicator of whether a person takes a particular stand or not. At this time, many Friends feel hesitant to display the flag, as it has now come to represent support for a martial spirit which is counter to deep Quaker belief in peace and equality.

In the past, Quakers have often been accused of not being Christian because our meetinghouses do not display crosses and our worship does not include water baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Rather than incorporating these signs and symbols into their practice to remove suspicion, they have used such questions to engage in a deeper articulation of their faith and practice. As a wave of patriotism breaks over the United

States, Guilford's practice of not flying or prominently displaying the US flag will similarly be called into question.

How should Guilford answer? We can point to the usual sources of authority for Friends: scripture, personal experience, and the witness of the Church and Quaker tradition.

Scripture offers no directive on flying the flag of a nation, but it does command that there are to be no other gods before God. Can the flag be an idol? Can nationalism be an idol? That must be answered by each individual. Friends have historically been wary of flags and nationalism.

As discussed above, Friends have typically placed the direct and immediate experience of the divine over outward forms and symbols of divinity. Does this inform our response to outward symbols such as the flag? Again, individuals have made different decisions about this. Some on campus fly flags from their rooms, offices, and shops. The institution, however, representing Friends tradition, must discern such a decision based on the experience of the full community, including the wider Quaker community.

Friends tradition, part of the Free Church tradition, has promoted separation of Church and State. Historically, national flags have not been displayed in Quaker meetinghouses or on meetinghouse grounds. In Guilford's 165 year tradition, the flag is known to have been flown over the campus only once – for half a day some sixty years ago. A few students put one on a long pine pole and hoisted it on their own.

It would seem that Guilford has come to an answer about the flag based on these traditional sources of authority, and that answer is that it is not appropriate to fly the flag on this Quaker campus.

- Max L. Carter
Guilford College, Ninth Month, 2001

Queries:

1. What is the purpose of raising a flag and singing the National Anthem before athletic contests? What is being said by the inclusion of this tradition before games and not before other activities at the College?
2. Among those things the American flag represents is a long tradition of the separation of Church and State. As a college founded by a religious community, the Religious Society of Friends, which strongly influenced that constitutional emphasis, what does it say to raise a flag over the campus?
3. Do athletic teams honor God and the Quaker tradition of the College in public ways before games equal to their ways of honoring the country? Which should take precedence?
4. In what ways do raising the flag and singing the National Anthem represent the core values of the College?

* This essay was written in the wake of the attacks of 9/11/01 in response to calls for the College to display its patriotism through flying the flag of the United States publicly on campus.