

A friendly quarrel with Baltzell's central thesis

By William C. Kashatus

The late E. Digby Baltzell made a career out of scorning Philadelphia's Quakers. In a succession of scholarly works on the city's upper class, he maintained that the Friends were too "egalitarian," too "content to rest on their inherited wealth and privileges" to provide effective leadership.

In comparison to Boston's Brahmins, whom he felt exemplified the Protestant work ethic, Baltzell saw the Quakers as inferior, failing to instill "a strong desire and capacity to take the lead in both community building and community reform."

And Philadelphia suffered for this failure, he said.

But Baltzell's model of leadership was far too elitist, his view of Quakerism much too simplistic to enjoy the acclaim it has received in this city. It is high time Philadelphians stopped apologizing for the city's Quaker heri-

Philadelphia Quakers have exhibited lots of leadership and should stop apologizing.

tage and begin to celebrate it.

Baltzell's interpretation of Quakerism was colored by a basic failure to recognize that within the Society of Friends, leadership has always been foremost a *spiritual* matter shared by a group of people, rather than asserted by an individual. New ideas and initiatives come from a group search in which all seek to act according to God's will. Even those Friends recognized as "leaders" by the non-Quaker public are viewed, in Quaker circles, as the individuals best able to discern God's message for the group.

The result has been a powerful culture of caring and moral leadership bequeathed to

subsequent generations. Philadelphia's Quakers established hospitals and schools and were in the forefront of efforts to abolish slavery and treat Native Americans fairly. Institutions they founded still serve the Philadelphia area, including Friends and Wills Eye hospitals and Haverford and Swarthmore colleges. Nor did they shrink from commerce — Lukens Steel and the Penn Mutual Insurance Co. were founded by Friends.

Today, Philadelphia continues to benefit from the efforts of many Quaker organizations whose mission to serve others is firmly grounded in the spiritually inspired and group-centered leadership of Friends. They include:

- American Friends Service Committee, founded to provide conscientious objectors with a constructive alternative to military service. Currently, AFSC directs volunteer efforts to address the poverty and disintegration of urban America as well as community development projects in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

- Friends Committee on National Legislation, which works with grassroots activists across the nation to educate and organize for peace and social justice.

The influence and contributions of these and other Quaker organizations have a global impact on politics, education and urban reform.

The strength of their leadership is that it arises from a genuine spirit of service to others and represents an earnest attempt to reach consensus among a group of people. This the kind of moral leadership much sought after in our contemporary society.

Despite the contributions Baltzell made to scholarship on Philadelphia's history, he never fully appreciated the uniqueness of this Quaker legacy.

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