Friends in Public Life

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM AMERICAN HISTORY

The following paper by Isaac Sharpless, Sc.D., LL.D., President 1915-16, *was read at the Annual Meeting, held 25th May,* 1916.

A VERY rough classification might divide ethical standards into two groups. One is based on results, the other on principles. The first is the favorite method of the politician, the man on the street and on the farm. If a thing produces good, it is good in itself; if evil, evil. A method of action, a piece of legislation is to be justified or condemned by the consequences which follow it. In ordinary affairs not involving moral considerations this sort of judgment is universal. Business decisions are wise or unwise according as they prosper. Fiscal legislation is ordinarily decided, not by eternal principles of political science, but by results as shown by history and experience which followed similar legislation in the past and are likely to follow it in the future. Perhaps ninety-nine per cent. of the acts of legislatures are determined by such considerations.

Philosophers codify these methods and variously call themselves hedonists, utilitarians, pragmatists and so on, as they vary the theories to suit the conditions of the age or country.

If one could see *all* the results nothing could be better. But the wisest of philosophers can only see a little way ahead and the shrewdest of politicians and business men have a limited horizon. What is manifestly useful to a few people immediately affected may not be for a more distant future or a wider circle. The primary results may seem highly beneficial but those which result from these, unseen by the performers, may be disastrous.

The other sort of standard is based on something supposedly more fundamental. According to this when

it comes to decisions involving the moral idea there is no room for a consideration of consequences. Things are inherently right or wrong. One must be guided by what is called the moral law. If we can ascertain this as applied to the case human duty is determined. It may lead apparently into all sorts of pitfalls and failures but in the long run it will prove a safe guide. In the eternal plans of a Divine Ruler of the universe that which seems inexpedient to us may be of the highest expediency ; our very failures may be the means to the greatest success. The real good is the permanent, abiding, satisfactory result which comes by the operation of all the many factors and forces producing it, too various and too hidden for human ascertainment, but which are all parts of one great plan. It is the duty of the individual not to mar this plan. If he knows what his part is, small or great, resulting to himself as it will in loss or gain, resulting to others apparently for material good or ill, he performs it faithfully, and concerns not himself greatly with what follows. His conscience determines his course and that is all that there is to it.

But how is the man who takes this attitude to find what this moral law is ? How is his conscience to be enlightened ? There are quite as many philosophic views on this question as in the field of utility. Men base the standards of rectitude on reason, or intuition, or revelation, or on authority human or divine, and deduce a code of conduct which satisfies the argument. Sometimes it is expressed in the sacred books of their religion, sometimes it comes to them directly as the revealed will of their Deity felt in their consciences, sometimes as the logical result of their rational processes.

The standard Friends of the past have belonged to this second class. When their duty was made known to them from their Bible or from direct revelation they were not disturbed by results. So they went to jail or to death for a conviction which often seemed trivial or foolish to others, rather than abate an item of it. If one argued with them that their liberty might do more for their cause than the small testimony, the argument fell on deaf ears. That testimony was their present duty and

all the rewards of disobedience, all the plausible considerations of results, had no bearing on the case. One and all the Friends of the first generations and the typical Friends which followed them were never utilitarian.

But the interesting fact remains that though they thus ignored results they got them. Their policy or, as it often seemed, lack of policy, secured consequences. They received religious liberty earlier and more fully than the temporising sects. They had their marriage regulations made legal; they were allowed to affirm rather than to swear; much respect was paid to their anti-martial views; they reformed the jails and asylums of England and America, and their treatment of aborigines and its consequences have become historic.

There are many reasons for saying that fidelity to right in the face of seeming disaster works better than any one expects. There are many facts of history which show that men and nations *do* get along, when they follow the right, in a way which no one could have foreseen. There is some inherent vitality in the truth which makes its own way, or has a way made for it.

Let us consider the subject with which Friends have most often come in conflict with the problems of government—the subject of military attack and defence. Is it at all as sure as most men suppose that a military force is the effective means of sustaining the national life and preserving the national ideals? We look on defenceless China with pity, perhaps contempt, a prey to every designing enemy. Yet for 5,000 years China has lived at least as securely as other nations, and preserved her civilisation. She has seen the death of Assyria, Greece, Rome and Carthage, the decay of the Ottomans, and may outlast the militarism of Europe. Her boundaries are largely intact, and she finds friends in time of need.

Poor Finland is in the hands of an unscrupulous despotic power. Had she resisted with arms her liberties would have long since perished. But she through her schools and churches kept alive the national spirit and ideals; and through the resistance of this spirit and these ideals has maintained a liberty which cannot be quenched.

The province of Pennsylvania, without forts, arms, martial spirit or equipment, for seventy years lived and prospered as no other Atlantic Colony, and though threatened by Indian attack by land, the inroad of pirates by water and the many enemies of England, preserved her peace with her liberty and her integrity, alone among the English Colonies.

The good following wars is often adduced. It is not possible to deny it. Manifest good things have been the consequence, often the effect, of many cataclysms, war, fire, flood and pestilence. The independence of America followed the Revolutionary War, the freedom of slaves the Civil War, settled government in California the Mexican War, and the rights of Cuba the Spanish War. But before we can logically credit war with all these benefactions, it is right to inquire whether the results could have been obtained by means which would not have caused the cruelties and crimes of the battle line or left the inheritance of bitter feeling which usually follows war. We can probably answer this in all cases in the affirmative.

We have only time for one illustration. The Mexican War is usually considered our most indefensible conflict, for the extension of slavery was its ulterior motive. But as we look at the prosperity of the great States bordering the frontier as compared with the anarchy and suffering across the line, was not the Mexican War justified by results ?

Undoubtedly, the condition of the population has been improved. But records now in existence show that the war was unnecessary to produce this result. For the people of California were just ready to ask admittance to the United States, and the annexation would have come peacefully and left no inheritance of suspicion and hatred.

But we are not much concerned about such arguments nor should they be used too much as a basis for action. They are mentioned only to show that reasoning from results has two sides and is an uncertain support of theory. It is often more easy to ascertain the right than to ascertain the expedient, and it has been the custom of Friends in their attitude to public life to work in this direction, and to trust the consequences.

This little dissertation seems necessary to explain their abstinence, in many cases in the past, from the activities of politics and of government. Their thoughts have been so pervaded with the idea that immoral acts cannot be made moral by the beneficent consequences which seem likely to result, that they become inefficient in the work of practical politics as it usually exists in America. When they swallow their scruples they cease to be in harmony with the Friends' position and lose their standing in the Church. Hence we have frequently found that those members who have become active in political life have been on the fringe of the Meeting rather than as they were in early Pennsylvania, the trusted ministers and officials, whose state duties bore on their consciences no less rigorously than their ecclesiastical duties, but who would sacrifice either rather than violate an apprehended moral obligation.

For good seems to come from the chicanery of politics no less certainly than from war. Out of the selfishness, the venality, the immoral strategy of the presidential nominating conventions has come the greatest line of rulers any country has ever seen in any age. From the days when Hamilton traded off with Jefferson, the location of the capital city for the funding of the state bonds in the first Congress down to the days of the last Congress, many measures yielding valuable results have come as the result of bargains not always honorable or moral. Every legislator knows that in order to have a good measure passed it often seems necessary to support others who want bad measures passed, and the perfectly independent man who yields nothing in this way is hardly efficacious in the councils or acceptable to his constituents. To do evil that selfish projects may succeed and to do evil that good may come are the lines that frequently distinguish the evil from the good man.

So I think that the principles which have been the keynote of Quaker morality and those which define the average morality of the politician even of the better sort are widely apart. The one is idealistic, the other utilitarian. The one has never been able to convert the other to the theory that idealism in the long run is of the

highest utility, and the other has had no faith in any principle whose utility he cannot grasp as likely to ripen in the very near future.

To this extent we can sympathise with the abstention of Friends from politics. If a state is dominated by an unholy machine which allows no one in office except obedient henchmen, who must be without scruple or independent character, then " the post of honor is the private station." There may be a place for them in the ranks of the militant reformers, but hardly in official life. It is not to the discredit of moral people that they are not governors or senators or judges in certain parts of our Union, where such offices are filled by men whose qualifications are meagre and methods dishonorable.

Colonial Pennsylvania and Rhode Island are the only communities in which for any considerable length of time Friends had enough responsibility to make the government somewhat a reflection of their principles. In Rhode Island it was rather the influence of a few public-spirited and willing men, than the exertion of control by the whole body which gave them their prominence. We shall therefore turn to Pennsylvania for our illustrations.

Here Friends from 1682 to 1756 had practically unopposed control of the legislature. While for the most of these years they were a minority of the population, they were elected as a result of a combination of popular respect for their character and principles on the one hand and shrewd political management on the other. Indeed, it may be said that up to the outbreak of the Revolutionary War in 1775 they controlled, except in the matter of martial preparation, the political destinies of the Province. For while after 1756 they did not hold office to any large extent, " the Quaker Party " was always an influence to be reckoned with.

During the first fifty years after the settlement, while the Executive was not always a Friend, he was under the practical control either of the Penn family or the Quaker legislature. Hence we have here conditions which give us the best opportunity to determine how a Friendly government would succeed in adjusting

the oftentimes conflicting claims of conviction and expediency.

In the matter of oaths there was no wavering. From the teaching of the fathers and from their own conscience they came with apparent unanimity to the conclusion that the taking or administration of an oath was wrong, and concerning this there could be no compromise. Whether it was the Biblical command or a sense of the nobility of simple truth that determined their position, they definitely and always refused to yield it to any consideration of political necessity. For about two years the Colony went almost without organised government because the English Crown would not permit official action without oaths and in many places all fit for official positions were Friends. The Meetings rigorously "dealt with" any, the least violation and many members objected to a form of affirmation which included the expression "in the presence of Almighty God" because it looked like an oath, and finally caused it to be abandoned.

But they could not prevent non-Friends from demanding and administering oaths, and so certain judicial and magisterial positions, the duties of which might require their administration, were closed to Friends by their own self-abnegation or the action of their meetings for discipline. Even complicity to the extent of accepting a clerkship under an official who administered oaths was prohibited. A Friend might, however, serve on a board of judges as a minority member if his position did not make him responsible for the acts of the board. Practically the agreement adopted in 1718 is still in operation over the country with a strong tendency towards the complete substitutions of affirmations for oaths. Indeed, the form of so-called "oaths" in many places now amounts to an affirmation.

When we turn from this consistent uncompromising idealistic position on the subject of oaths to other matters the record is not so clear. The taking of human life was not apparently a matter on which Friends felt that such a plain stand could be made. This was apparently in the realm of expediency to be decided by political considerations. William Penn himself reduced

capital punishment to make it apply to treason and first degree murder only, not an inconsiderable step in advance. But it is an interesting fact that in the year of his death, 1718, the bill granting relief to Friends in the matter of oaths, also contained a provision to adopt the English penal code, which included capital punishment for some dozen of crimes. This measure was a political bargain. The Friends gave up any convictions they may have had against capital punishment in order to obtain their liberty as to oaths. The bill containing both provisions was suggested by the non-Quaker Deputy Governor, Sir William Keith,[1] a shrewd politician, was drawn up by a Quaker lawyer, David Lloyd,[2] equally shrewd, adopted by a legislature almost if not unanimously composed of Friends, and received with acclamation by the Quaker population, which proceeded to raise through their Meetings a sum of money to defray the expense of having it ratified in England. The only explanation possible is that the life of a criminal was less sacred in their eyes than the protest against swearing.

But the sternest conflict between the claims of conviction and utility was on the question of war. While nearly all Friends of the first half century would subscribe to the statement that war was unchristian and wrong under all circumstances it was hard to draw the lines. Under the leadership of David Lloyd an appropriation for war was voted to the Queen and put into the hands of trustees till they could assure themselves that "¶ it would not be dipt in blood." Under the influence of Penn's best friends another similar appropriation was voted unconditionally, *how* it should be spent being, as Isaac Norris[3] expressed it, "not our business but hers." Frequently after 1740 the Quaker legislature would appropriate money "for the King's use," knowing well the use to which it would be put. Their favorite preamble to such a resolution was "As the world is now situated we do not condemn the use of arms by others but are principled against it ourselves." This was possibly a defensible position for it meant that things were right or wrong for individuals according as their consciences approved or disapproved. On the other hand, if there were any such thing as a standard of rectitude

they must have recognised that it was bad not only for the individual but for the state to violate it, and that all violations brought their inevitable penalties.

The opponents of Friends' views urged that there was no essential difference between resisting outside enemies and resisting criminals within. "You hang," said they, "a burglar who breaks into your house, yet you will not take any steps to resist an organised mass of men who plunder your houses wholesale, and destroy your families." To this Friends replied, in the great peace controversy carried on between Governor Thomas [4] and John Kinsey,[5] the speaker of the Assembly, about 1740, that the burglar was consciously doing wrong, violating all laws human and Divine, and deserved what he got, while the soldier was innocent of intentional wrong doing or was even acting up to the highest conception of duty. Hence there was a difference in motive which justified different judgments as to culpability. With their views as to capital punishment this was probably as good an answer as they could have made, but was hardly basing their actions on an eternal principle.

If given to exact definitions they might have taken something like this position: "We are not absolute non-resistants but we stop resistance where it becomes in itself criminal according to the moral law as our consciences see it. We do not define the exact line where criminality begins but war and its practices are for us manifestly over the line and therefore we cannot accept any responsibility for it."

William Penn himself was a combination of an idealist and a practical man of affairs. In early life the former prevailed in his writings, but when the details of a most complicated and most insistent problem came upon him in the management of his Colony and his own unfortunate financial conditions, he went very close to the line. It was with a most abounding enthusiasm that he entered upon his task of government. Religious liberty, democracy, peace, plain speaking and honest dealing, justice to natives, these were the principles that he announced with evident sincerity and an apparently inextinguishable optimism. They were to be applied to Quaker and non-Quaker, to white man and red, to

individual and nation. There is nothing in history much sadder than the way in which this optimism was worn away by petty opposition, by well-meant but unfortunate financial management, by an apparent necessity for political compromises, by the breakdown of some of his cherished hopes. The cheering fact remains that during the last two years of his normal life his difficulties personal and political largely disappeared, his Colony returned to him in love and respect, and peace and prosperity began to cover his long and discouraging struggle. His idealistic plans had not all been realised, but neither had they all failed, and his hopes for a full fruition were strong.

From 1710 to 1739 was the Golden Age of Quaker government. No wars loomed up; the oath question received a settlement; the Quaker political machine was developed into a high stage of efficiency; the German vote was satisfied; the oncoming migration of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians had not grown into large proportions; political expediency ruled the councils because there were no moral issues on which men would seriously differ; the Governors found it to their interest to act in harmony with the Assembly. The widow and sons of William Penn seemed to be better judges of Deputy Governors than was the Founder. Material prosperity added to the general satisfaction, and the foundations of Quaker fortunes in commerce and agriculture were laid. Coincidently with this prosperity and control, a generation of Friends grew up who were less certain than their predecessors that it was necessary to suffer seriously for convictions, or who argued that the good things brought about by peace and good fortune were worth more than the idealistic devotion to principles which would seem to work out doubtful results. In short, they changed from *a priori* devotees of uncompromising standards of rectitude to utilitarians.

This did not, however, affect the whole body but became most noticeable among the more wealthy old families, for already there were "old" families in Philadelphia.

Then troubles began to come. Thomas Penn[6] treated the Indians badly, and they fell into the temptations which

the French laid for them. England went to war first with Spain, and then with France, and demanded colonial aid. The Penn family gave secret instructions to the Deputies which, because they were secret and only brought out as needed, incensed the Assembly. These Deputies could not understand Quaker scruples, and the Friends probably displayed " a little more warmth than is consistent with the moderation we profess," as Dr. Fothergill[7] expressed it, in opposing what they deemed unrighteous measures of defence and taxation. Till 1756 there was a constant series of disputes and occasions of ill-feeling which were injurious to harmony in the state and had reflex influence on the Church. James Logan,[8] William Penn's secretary and agent, then an old and respected citizen, sent a paper to the Yearly Meeting advocating defensive war, and urging that those who could not join should give up their places in government, which paper was not read. On the other hand, the more rigid of the Friends of the old school gave the same advice because they thought that truth was being compromised by the unholy measures and injurious arguments used to support the political Friends in their contentions with the Executive.

The matter became critical in 1764 when a body of border ruffians marched in motley ranks from the Susquehanna and threatened to kill a band of friendly Indians encamped in Philadelphia. Many citizens, including about 200 young Friends, took up arms and the " Great Meeting House " was opened to shield the defenders on a stormy February day. Nothing came of the attack because Benjamin Franklin[9] persuaded the frontiersmen to go home without damage, but the Monthly Meeting took up the case of the militant Quakers. Some repented and apologised ; some were labored with with doubtful results, while some defiantly defended their action and were not disowned.

As we have seen, the Friends in the Assembly quibbled considerably in the days which followed 1740. Bad treatment for which the Friends were not responsible made the Indians hostile on the frontiers, and finally in 1756 the Governor declared war. When during these years they appropriated money quite liberally " for the

King's use," they knew it would be spent for forts and guns, though they all the time worked and hoped for an early peace. But with the declaration of war, their compromises stopped. Acting on the advice of English Friends they withdrew from the Assembly and declined re-election, and Pennsylvania knew direct Quaker control of politics no more.

It was a strain upon their past habits, for they had managed with striking success the most prosperous Colony along the Atlantic coast, and the people were continually importuning them to reconsider their declaration. Probably they themselves expected to return to political positions after the wars were over but that time did not come. Indian and French excitement and opposition to the English Government extended to the Revolutionary War and that cataclysm ended Quaker influence as well as Quaker official life in the Quaker Colony.

Through all these years there was growing up, basing itself on George Fox's advice to keep clear of the "commotions" involved in government, a feeling that Friends should take no part in public life. Their course in the Revolution, which had involved the disownment of some 400 members for participation in the warlike affairs of the day, mainly on the American side, made them unpopular, and they withdrew into a more mystical life and an uncompromising devotion to principle and testimony, and the Quaker of the nineteenth century of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting was evolved.

This little historical sketch would seem to indicate that the application of a Quaker conscience to state affairs in a non-Quaker community is impossible.

Probably conditions will never be better than in Colonial Pennsylvania, and there it broke down, though at first against the popular will, in the face of apparent political necessity.

But it does not prove that Friends may not accept many posts in government, both executive and legislative, which need not touch on their convictions and in which they may render signal service.

They may also bring the attention of a nation to

the moral issues of the day, a task for which Friends with the ancient sort of standards would seem to have great advantages.

It tones up the nation to have its thoughts turned to ethical, rather than exclusively economic subjects. One moral question brings another in its train and men get to thinking in terms of right and wrong rather than expedient and opportune. In the decade prior to our Civil War when men were fused together on the subject of the rights of man, and used such phrases as "the higher law," "the irrepressible conflict," "the true grandeur of nations," there was a manifest toning up of standards. Then came the war and the host of questions of currency, tariff, revenue and material issues generally, which divided parties in the succeeding years, and morality took the second place to economics and men thought in dollars rather than in righteousness. We had a great growth in wealth and all its unhealthy accompaniments of monopolies, rebates, corporate interference with government and boss and machine rule in politics. Later the moral sense of the nation reasserted itself and the development of attention to human rights and the social conscience, and to specific matters like temperance and peace and civil service reform, went on apace. It is one of the great evils of war that it draws the interests of men from such movements, to the more pressing but less vital ones of national defence, sources of national income, reduction of national expenditure for social development, and all the lesser breed which designing politicians take advantage of to press upon us their own selfish designs for office and emolument. Some beneficent reforms which need advertising to make people appreciate them are thrust aside by the insistence on the more spectacular national needs, and the wholesome march of moral and political reform in a democracy is impeded. For this march under normal conditions is the very lifeblood of progress. The American nation will not get far astray if its attention can be seriously turned to a great issue and a great need. How quickly when it once grasped the dangers of corporation control of politics, with many blundering and foolish steps, it is true, it brought its downfall! Free discussion and the honest purposes

of an intelligent electorate can be depended on to clear away any heresy before it reaches the stage of serious danger to the national soul.

But morality must have the right of way, and while matters in which the economic rather than the moral predominate, should have their large place in national councils and public discussion, it is the duty of every man with influence in public life to press to the front the great abiding projects which have their root in eternal right, and here our Quaker traditions and principles should make a prepossession in favor of such a course of action.

There are a number of reforms which have been our concerns very largely in the past. The substitution of life imprisonment for capital punishment, the development of the reformatory idea in our prisons and kindly treatment in asylums, the one-price system in sales, the limitation of fortunes and expenditures within moderate dimensions, theories of education which are at once practical and spiritual, the rigidly honest management of public funds, all of these, in which good men generally would now join, have some of their roots in legislation, and if not national party issues, not infrequently become the issues in State or local elections or legislation.

Then there is the great question of warlike preparation and policy. This is the rock on which Quaker participation in politics has usually been shipwrecked. It broke its control in Provincial Pennsylvania. It drove the Society back into itself in the Revolutionary War and produced an inwardness from which it has only in the last half century evolved. It forced John Bright from the British Cabinet when Alexandria was bombarded. It caused the breaking of the property of Joshua Rowntree in the Boer War. It has sent many a conscientious sufferer to jail rather than pay military fines or join in military exercises. It is now operating to render the pacifists, with whom all real Friends must join themselves, objects of unpopularity among a great host of men, some unthinking and hysterical, some seriously concerned for the national safety.

Here is the great problem of to-day for the Christian statesman who can maintain himself consci-

entiously in public life. He needs to show the nation that an aggressive policy of good will, the absence of all design on the integrity or interests of others, the rigid and even generous enforcement of all treaties and conventions, the full comprehension of and respect for the points of view and political and commercial interests of others, are worth more in maintaining peace than dreadnoughts or submarines, coast defences or standing armies. Had we the greatest armaments in the world, which after the expenditure of billions of dollars and years of time we might have, with all the military spirit and commercial interests necessarily developed by such an aggregation, who could trust the nation not to enter with slight provocation upon a career of conquests or overbearing treatment in the cause of mercenary or political interests. The danger of foreign aggression upon a nation doing its generous part in world diplomacy, upon whose goodwill the commercial prosperity of all others was largely dependent, is far less than the danger, under the the guise of preparedness, of creating a spirit of militarism, which will break down our Christian standards and lead on to a cataclysm such as a similar spirit has developed in Europe. We need to teach our people through the mouths of practical politicians, in office and out, the Christian basis of government, none the less so now, when the epidemic of force is being spread through the country with great skill and no little success. It is demanding of us that we reverse the policy of a century and, as Whittier told us in another cause, that we

> "Run anew the evil race the old lost nations ran,
> And die like them of disregard of God and wrong of man."

Friends will find more allies in our uncompromising positions than ever before. There are many who would say that under any provocation their allegiance to Christianity as they understand it is supreme, that conscience is so educated that the immoralities of war are impossible to them.

The Friend stands for the development of personality. For this he can not go to war, for this involves the subordination of personality to human commands, doing

evil that good may come, the merging of the individual conscience into the conscience of the mass. He can not swear for his every word has the sanction of truth behind it. He can not be an unquestioning member of a political group taking on or leaving off principle at the behest of a leader or of utilitarian considerations. He can not grind the poor in business or the criminal in jail, for the respect for his own personality induces respect for that of others. He must go through life more or less isolated, not from lack of sympathy for others, for he has this in the highest degree, but because the machinery of modern methods is too rigid for his open-minded and independent soul. He will take his orders from his own discerning heart rather than from current opinion or popular impulse.

If he can do all this and still be an effective public servant, as an exceptional man in an exceptional place may be, the Quaker in politics may live. If not he will sacrifice place to conscience, expediency to principle.

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[1] Sir William Keith was nine years Lieutenant-Governor of Pennsylvania. He died in London, Eng., in 1749.

[2] For a review of the life and work of David Lloyd (1656-1731) see THE JOURNAL, iii.

[3] Isaac Norris (1701-1766) was Speaker of the Assembly from 1751 to the year of his death, and an able Statesman.

[4] George Thomas became Governor in 1738 and relinquished the office in 1747.

[5] John Kinsey (c. 1696-1750) was also Clerk to Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, and Chief Justice of the Province.

[6] Thomas Penn (1701/2-1775) was the principal Proprietor of Pennsylvania for nearly thirty years.

[7] John Fothergill, M.D. (1712-1780), a prominent English Friend and noted doctor of medicine, of London.

[8] James Logan (1674-1751) was prominent as a Friend as well as in public life. His daughter, Sarah (1715-1744), married Isaac Norris.

[9] Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) was a prominent politician and public man in Pennsylvania. He was agent for this Colony in London and American Ambassador in Paris.