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QUAKERISM: ITS AFFINITIES, CONTRASTS, AND SECRET

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So allied was the Quakerism of the eighteenth century to the Montanism of the second in certain essential respects that Canon Curteis in his book on "Dissent in relation to the Church of England" prefaces the Lecture on Quakerism with a list of dates in which it is linked up directly with a movement no less than fifteen hundred years before, with which in many important respects it might seem at first sight not to have the slightest affinity. At first, indeed, the association of the two might seem, for Quakers, the very reverse of flattering. What possible connexion can the Montanism of Phrygia with its spiritual exaggerations, its severe asceticism, its terrible penances, its sensational Millenarianism, its startling revelations, its visionary orientalism, have with a movement springing out of the heart of an age and a nation far removed across the world-cycles and the whole distance of Europe, hating all that was unpractical and visionary—the foe of "enthusiasm" in every shape and form; a movement initiated and carried forward by such sober men as George Fox, William Penn, and Robert Barclay, and taking shape in an American Colony founded successfully, with practical gifts of administration, by one from whom it has derived a great and honoured name? What link can men possibly establish between such fanciful dreams as those of Maximilla and Priscilla, on the one hand, and the practical philanthropy and simple, unaffected piety of Elizabeth Fry, or between the fierce, persecuting zeal of Tertullian and the gentle, forgiving spirit of James Parnell, William Dewsbury—for nineteen years, altogether, a prisoner for conscience sake—of Marmaduke Stevenson, of Isaac Penington, six times imprisoned under the Restoration, whose writings "still speak to us of the calm and joy of the mystic reconciled with God and man?"

Yet, in spite of the obvious differences, which appear on the surface, differences largely—as our Western minds will think—to the credit of Quakerism, the spiritual affinities between the two movements are deep and suggestive. For both alike are the emphasis of the Religion of the Spirit on the side of His sovereignty and

freedom, and, in the case of a third and later movement, Methodism, in spite of similar contrasts, there is the same affinity still.

It is not only by its strange affinities, but by its equally striking contrasts that one can best realize the special standpoint of Quakerism. Compare it, for example, with the great movement, Puritanism, out of which, in a sense, it sprang. Both movements were protests against superstition, or worldliness, in the Church, and against unspirituality in private life. Both were remarkable for their insistence upon the truth and infinite significance of Christian revelation, upon the supremacy of conscience, upon "the liberty of prophesying," upon the supreme claim of God over human life, upon the sense of the nearness and reality of the unseen. The Puritan Fleetwood or Hampden or Milton as much as Tertullian the Montanist, or George Fox the Quaker, aspired, in Macaulay's vivid words, "instead of catching occasional glimpses of the Deity through an obscuring veil . . . to gaze full on His intolerable brightness, and to commune with Him face to face." Each stood for a new ideal of worship, faith, and conduct which was utterly at variance with the spirit of a half-believing, inconsistent age. The emphasis of each, though in different ways, was upon Truth and Reality. And, though from very different causes, both movements suffered from, and were purified by, persecution.

Yet there all real similarity fails. The reasons for the unpopularity, the intense national dislike, of Puritanism are far different, and far more excusable than those which, without the smallest excuses, hounded the unoffending "Friends" to prison or exile. We may condemn the reaction of dissoluteness and irreligion which disgraced and degraded the English life of the Restoration from the Court downwards, and inoculated the nation with a virus which, even yet, is only half-removed. We may mourn the utter loss at the Restoration of one of the most splendid opportunities which English History presents for the reunion and reconstruction of national life. We may admire immensely the heroic steadfastness in principle, the wholesome cleanness of life, the passion for spiritual and political freedom, the intense loyalty to the Word of God, the perfervid sense of the overshadowing presence of God which controlled so much of Puritan action, and made the English of his day "the people of a book," till, as John Richard Green says, "all the activities that had been called into life by the age that was passing

away were seized, concentrated, and steadied to a definite aim by the spirit of religion," till " the whole temper of the nation felt the change," and " the whole nation became, in fact, a church." We may and must refuse to dissociate Puritanism as such with patriotism, culture, statesmanship or spirituality when we think of such men as John Hampden, John Milton, Oliver Cromwell and John Bunyan. And yet we can understand how the reaction from the Commonwealth almost naturally became a reaction not merely political but social and spiritual, and even individual, till all the good which it might have left fruitfully behind was wiped away, as men try to blot out the memory of some hideous nightmare.

For the return to which the Puritan sought to bring men back from their superstition and folly was a return to the letter and not the Spirit; and that, with all their limitations and mistakes, was just what both Montanist and Quaker stood for. It is because of that essential difference that it is worth while thus comparing these three movements together. Adhesion to the Bible, loyalty to the Bible, acceptance of the Bible as the one complete standard of all creed and conduct, gave its consecration to the whole earlier Puritan movement, and made it so mighty a lever for the uplifting of Mediæval England out of the pit of superstition and the slough of spiritual ignorance. With ourselves the Renaissance was, under the influence of Colet and Erasmus, a renaissance to the pure Word of God in its original tongue, as against the follies and deceits of pope and priest. " Greece rose from the dead," " Greece crossed the Alps," with the New Testament in her hand. " I long for the day," wrote Erasmus, " when the husbandman shall sing portions (of the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament) to himself as he follows the plough, when the weaver shall hum them to the tune of his shuttle, when the traveller shall wile away with their stories the weariness of his journey." The next generation saw his hope fulfilled. " The New Learning " found its attraction and its crown in the eager, reverent study of the Bible, and the sweetness and strength of the golden Elizabethan age are mostly derived from that. The Puritan, more keenly than the men and women round about him, felt the force of this appeal to one Book as the standard of all Divine and human knowledge and action. It taught him the supremacy of conscience, and made him heroic and steadfast in the face of bitter persecution. And by it he guided his whole conduct and relationships. In Bun-

yan's immortal allegory it is with a "book in his hand" which works conviction in his heart that we first behold his pilgrim; it is with the "words of the book" that he seeks to convince Pliable; it is by "reading the words of the book" that he comes by his burden; "the best of books" is in the hands of the "very grave person" whose portrait Christian sees in Interpreter's House; the key of promise which that book contains opens any lock in Doubting Castle. This devotion to the Bible, so long as it is spiritual and intelligent, lies at the heart of all true, living, Christian experience.

It lay also at the heart of that bolder outlook upon life, that strong, self-reliant love of freedom, that spirit of fearless adventure which thrust men out to seek liberty of worship in the lands of the West. For his were the Pilgrim Fathers who sailed, in the small barque, *Mayflower*, from Plymouth Rock for Massachusetts to found a New England, men and women "whose honour shall be theirs to the world's end." And their women are of the same heroic mould—such gentle spirits as Shakespeare's favourite daughter Elizabeth at home, or "the Puritan maiden Priscilla" abroad,

> Dreaming all night, and thinking all day of the hedgerows of England,
> Thinking of lanes and fields, and the song of the lark and the linnet,

yet withal.

> She, the Puritan girl, in the solitude of the forest,
> Making the humble house, and the modest apparel of homespun,
> Beautiful with her beauty, and rich with the wealth of her being.

But all Puritanism was not made of such souls as John Alden, "the fair-haired, taciturn stripling," nor sweet, skein-winding Priscilla, nor even blunt, honest "Miles Standish, the Puritan Captain." Over against all this sweetness and good was the mischief wrought by an over-literalism which fettered and confined the freedom of the Spirit. Thus the Puritan's religion became a separatist, not a unitive force, a matter of prescription and forced interpretations, with a constantly intensified anti-human tendency, ending in a hard, unsocial sternness of life. "The ordinary Puritan," writes Green, "loved them that were godly much, misliking them that were wicked and profane." His bond to other men was not the sense of a common manhood, but the recognition of a brotherhood among the elect. "Life became hard, rigid, colourless, as it became intense." Puritanism found its theological expression in Calvinism, in the gloomy introspections of Oliver Cromwell, and even

in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* it flung its Slough of Despond full across the entrance to the heavenly way as "a place that cannot be mended," even though it helped the hapless pilgrim with "good and substantial steps." It left little place for freedom, for progress, for sympathy, for enlightenment. The Puritan conception of religion, of worship, and of Church discipline, was of an "immutable rule" laid down already in the letter of Holy Scripture and opposed alike to the human freedom of Anglicanism on the one hand as one finds it in Hooker, and the belief in continuous inspiration as one meets it in George Fox.

The Quaker knew no such slavish adhesion to the letter. With him the ever-present sense of the sovereignty of the enlightening Spirit overrode the authority of an infallible Bible.

Margaret Fell has given us the scene on the fast-day in Ulverstone which changed her whole future. George Fox had received permission to speak. And she tells how his words burnt in upon her soul.

"Then he went on and opened the Scriptures and said, 'The Scriptures were the prophets' words and Christ's and the apostles' words, and what, as they spoke, they enjoyed and possessed . . . then what had any to do with the Scriptures but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth?' You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this, but what canst thou say? . . . What thou speakest, is it inwardly from God? This opened me so that it cut me to the heart, and then I saw clearly that we were all wrong. So I sat down in my pew and cried bitterly to the Lord, 'We are all thieves; we are all thieves; we have taken the Scriptures in words, and nothing of them in ourselves.'"

Here is the emphasis experimentally, in personal dealing with one's own soul, of that doctrine of the Inner Light which forms the basis of so much that is best in Quakerism and in all mystical religion. Not that the Quaker ignored, or ignores, the true claim of Holy Scripture to inspiration; still less that he neglected to study it constantly and reverently. But the Puritan came to make an idol of the book itself, and thus missed its living meaning.

The Puritan closed the door of his soul to all incoming of a fresh revelation as an impossibility. To him God had ceased to speak. The one revelation in which he believed lay of necessity in the past. "The life of Christ on earth was an event utterly isolated." The Spirit was bound by His own self-imposed limitations. His religion came to rest thus for its foundations on the historical rather than the spiritual.

On the other hand, the Quaker protested for that inner light "which lighteth every man that cometh into the world," for the livingness of religion, for the continuity of revelation, for the liberty of the Spirit. He refused to no man, however dark and degraded, the possession of that inner light, only it needed to be kindled and fanned into a flame. It seemed to him as though the Church around him "had built a hundred beautiful shrines over the places where God had once spoken to men, and a great cathedral over the spot where the dead Christ had lain, only to make it clearer that God no longer spoke to His people now, and that Jesus of Nazareth was passed far away from the lives of men."[1] To him the Spirit had never ceased to strive with man, or to instruct him, if willing to be taught. "The Bible took its right place, not as a wonderful, God-made book, fallen from heaven among men, without a parallel of any kind, and with nothing in our lives to correspond to its revelation, but as the unique revelation amidst a never-ending series of revelations," as something which the Spirit alone could interpret to our souls. It was "the witness of the Spirit," the "manifestation of the Spirit," the "searching of the Spirit," the "discernment" of the Spirit (1 Cor. ii. 14), which, to him, were absolutely necessary. "To that of God in your conscience I speak," was George Fox's constant appeal to his adversaries. For it seemed to him[2] that "all around him he found seekers, discontented with second-hand truths; their fingers already groping at the shutters of the soul's windows," when "they had but to open them for God's daylight to come in." "Inward and immediate revelation," writes Barclay, their great apologist, "is the only sure and certain way to attain the true and saving knowledge of God." Even spiritual truths become lies when told by carnal men—"no better than the counterfeit representations of things in a comedy," "like the prattling of a parrot."[3] Take but away the Spirit, and Christianity remains no more Christianity than the dead carcase is the man.

On the other hand His revelation is immediate, objective, continuous, certain, in correspondence both with Holy Scripture and with right reason. Given His inner light and you need despair of no man's salvation. Thus the optimism of the Quaker (which

[1] Barclay's *Apology*, p. 66.
[2] Barclay's *Apology*. p. 55. [3] P. 2, 28, 39.

lay at the heart of his humanitarianism), in contrast to the Pessimism of the Puritan, his missionary zeal, his bright, living, spiritual experience, his intelligent devotion to the Holy Scripture, his fervent philanthropy, found their fountain-head in an ever-maintained, childlike, trustful dependence upon a spiritual grace, a spiritual enlightenment, a spiritual help which could never be refused or withdrawn if only, on his side, the channel was kept unclogged and free. "I received of the Lord." "I was moved by the Lord." "The Lord opened to me." "The Lord showed me." In such constantly recurring phrases as these, you get again and again the expression of an utter dependence of the Quaker upon the sovereign power of the Lord the Spirit. The movement, till it was cast out and bitterly persecuted, was at heart a return to primitive Christianity, an emphasis of the inwardness of all true religion, a giving place, in an unbelieving and intellectualized age, to the supremacy of the Spirit. Such a movement was just what the arid and lifeless eighteenth century needed. If only Churchmen had had a large enough heart and a deep enough loyalty to the Holy Spirit to have received it this might have been the Pentecostal breath of God to a half-asphyxiated Church.

To read to-day of their sufferings and martyrdoms in England and America—the spoiling of all their goods, the prolonged imprisonments, the bitter banishments, the selling of them as slaves in Barbadoes and Virginia, the sentences of death—fills the heart, not only with an infinite indignation and pity, but an infinite regret, and forces the question, How was it possible that even nominal Christians should have been so deceived? For the unworldly, unselfish life, with its crown of utterly fearless and forgiving death, was a "witness of the Spirit" as loud as the testimony of Holy Scripture itself, in which men professed to believe so intensely. It was the emphasis of the immediacy and directness of the imparted power of God. "He had no power to touch me," writes George Fox, of a ruffian, who, having been offered five pounds by the justices to seize him, passed him unmolested. "The Lord's power preserved me over them all." "The Lord's power came on all," he writes at Bristol, in the midst of expected disturbances, "and we had a blessed meeting." The power might be manifested in weakness, but, even through weakness, it was theirs. "I am going up to the city of London to suffer," answered one of them, when

told of the peril he was facing. "There! Take that for Christ's sake," were the words which accompanied an assailant's heavy blow. "Friend, I do receive it so," was the mild reply. "This is to me," said Mary Dyer, as she walked to a scaffold from which for a time she was unexpectedly spared, "the greatest joy I could enjoy in this world"; and, when the suffering actually came, in answer to the scoffer's question: "Yea, I have been in Paradise these several days." "I have a dwelling," said another, a shoemaker, when questioned at Newgate, "where neither thief, murderer, nor persecutor can come"; and, being asked again: "It is," he replied, "in God." "In the prison-house," wrote William Dewsbury, one of Fox's earliest converts and closest fellow-workers, "I sang praises to my God, and esteemed the bolts and locks put upon me as jewels."

How much the Church of that century needed a realization of God and a witness for God as living and real as these we all acknowledge to-day. The "wind" was again "blowing where it listed." So, as once it had stirred David among the sheepfolds, and Amos among the herds of Tekoa, it moved the soul of George Fox, the young Leicestershire shepherd, and spoke with the power of a divine revelation to him as he walked in the fields near Coventry. It was "one first day morning" that the voice "soft as the breath of even" came to him, with the message that "being bred at Oxford and Cambridge was not enough to fit or qualify men to be ministers of Christ." It proclaimed that "people and professors trampled upon the word of Christ while they fed one another with words." It led him alone with the Word of God in hand, to field and orchard and hollow tree and lonesome places, and flung upon it there a fresh and glorious light—a light answering to, and kindling to a burning flame, the light already burning within. It gave forth to the world a man with a message and a people with a message—simple, definite, convincing, satisfying. "There was none among them all that could speak to my condition. When all my hopes in them, and in all men, were gone . . . then, oh then, I heard a Voice which said, 'There is One, even Jesus Christ, that can speak to thy condition; and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy." [1]

That is what we have again and again through all Christian history—that, indeed, which makes it distinct and unique—the

[1] G. Fox, *Journal*, I. 55.

inner light, the inner voice, answering to something in Man, yet instinct with God, aflame with God, authoritative from God, which awakens, convicts, consumes, consoles, transforms, tranquillizes, ennobles:—whether it comes to Augustine in the little cottage garden under the opal Italian skies at Milan, "tired of devouring time or of being devoured by it," or to Joan of Arc in the pleasant woods of Domremy beside the flowering banks of the Meuse, or to Francis d'Assisi in the half-ruinous chapel among the cypresses and olives of Assisi, or to Pascal and the Mère Angelique in the quiet cloistered solitudes of Port Royal, or to William Law in the little study at Kingscliffe, or to Wesley and his friends in the college rooms of the Holiness Club at Oxford. In each case it is the assertion by the Lord the Spirit of His sovereign freedom to speak as He wills to whom He wills.

There is another side of Quakerism, as there is to Montanism, Quietism, Methodism, and all similar movements. There are extravagances which are psychical, not spiritual, aberrations from sober Bible truth due to want of wise leadership or sympathetic outside treatment; negations which, in their reaction from what is tinged with evil become themselves dangerous and mischievous. But what no sober student of spiritual history can ever lose sight of is the essential, tremendous truth to which they bear witness, a truth constantly being overlooked even by the people of God, the sovereign freedom of the Holy Spirit's working. Forth into a religious world preoccupied with its own earthly ideals, indifferent to the real claims of Christ, unconscious, often, of the prime secret of Christianity, forth into a Christianity which itself had become a name only to live when it was dead, these men and movements were thrust by a driving force such as that which "drove" (Greek, ἤγετο, was driven), our Lord into the wilderness, divine, not human, unexplainable except by a supernatural influence, potent to achieve mighty and abiding upheavals, swinging back the strong gateway of spiritual death, breathing on the slain that they might live, sweeping like some mighty flood, into the world's desert areas "till there be no more death nor barren land," burning up the dross that had obliterated the gold of human nature, shining till those that sat in darkness and the shadow of death felt its healing light. It is best to dwell with sympathy and appreciation on the Divine reality in each case before we mark the almost unavoidable human limita-

tions, and to ask how far the Church herself is to blame for these. Thus, as Canon Curteis has written,[1] "it is not in the affirmations of George Fox but in his denials that the Church of Christ meets him and repudiates his teaching." To some extent, so far as she is living to-day, the Church has absorbed the essentials of his teaching. And if Quaker principles had been less antagonistically treated, and, instead, transfused into the general current of national religious life,[2] they would not only have escaped their own extravagances but also have contributed the very spiritual elements which the age most had need of. The spirit that awoke to realize that the "steeple-house men call the Church" was not really the temple of the Living God, was no anti-church but rather anti-formal spirit. The mind that, in its strong conviction of the universal inner light shrank with horror from the slavish adhesion to the letter rather than the spirit, was certainly not unappreciative of the immense worth of the Bible. It was God's own protest in man for reality, God's passion in man for truth, God's revelation of life and beauty to the hearts of men. It was "the abbey of the Holy Ghost"—the religion of the heart—reared to remind men and women of the worship and the presence which they had forgotten. "What was urgently wanted," writes Canon Curteis (p. 268), "and what Christ, I think was really commissioning George Fox and others to do was, not a destructive, but rather a constructive work—the work of breathing fresh life into old forms, recovering the meaning of old symbols, raising from the dead old words." And, may we not add, bringing home to many who are still strangers to it the splendid reality of an uplifting Presence

> "Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean, and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,"

the sovereign Spirit Who alone makes possible and real the promise: "I will dwell in them and walk in them, and I will be their Father and they shall be sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty."

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[1] Curteis: *Dissent in relation to the Church of England, p.* 254.
[2] Overton: *History of the Eighteenth Century, p.* 242