

An Apology for Perfection

by
Cecil E. Hinshaw



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Pendle Hill Publications
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Email: publications@pendlehill.org

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An attempt to understand and evaluate a religious movement properly begins with the search for its essential foundations—its meaning at the point of its origin. Then the faith, understood historically, must be tested in the crucible of contemporary struggles and problems. Like the view through a stereoscope, the resultant picture, doubly viewed through lenses of a past age and the present scene,

offers a truer insight into the meaning of a religious faith than can be obtained without such a perspective.

The marks of an era—its aspirations and achievements, its doubts and failures—are indelibly written on a religious movement at the time of its birth. Every religious movement is a response to the problems and questions that men struggle with at that point in history. The measure of success attained is not only the number of its adherents, but also the ability of the faith to provide for its devotees assurance that they are rising above the doubts and despair of their age, achieving answers that can stand against the storms and winds that shattered or weakened other faiths. Sometimes it happens that the religious problems and issues of one age become the inescapable battles of a later age. The description and the superficial appearance of the problems vary, but the basic issues remain unchanged. So in the cycle of human events our present age struggles again with some of the religious problems that gave rise to Quakerism in the seventeenth century. The conflicts of thought that marked the differentiation of Quakerism from Calvinism and from materialism are repeated again today under new names.

Seed Bed of Quakerism

There are obvious dissimilarities between the period in which Quakerism was born and the age in which we live. Puritanism, the seed bed of the Society of Friends, seems far removed from the self-indulgent spirit of modern America. Nor is there to be found the preoccupation with religious questions that dominated much of English life and

literature three centuries ago. It is self-evident that the age of science has swept away most of the theological foundation of seventeenth century thought. In fact, our world is so different in many ways from England in 1650 that a quite lively imagination is necessary for us even to understand their thoughts and struggles.

Yet it is easy to exaggerate these differences. Puritanism was not actually the dominant spirit in Cromwellian England and the masses of people probably lived lives even less restrained and disciplined than do the masses today. Sexual standards were looser than ours, as a study of the non-religious literature of the times clearly shows. Although they did not have the means at hand for indulgence in material possessions that we have, there was perhaps even more desire by all who could afford them for fine clothes in the latest fashion. Feasting on rich foods by those who could do so was more common then than now. Granted that life generally was much harder and more rigorous for people of that time, especially for the common people, it must be recognized that amusement and self-indulgence were common for all those who could manage the opportunity. In fact, Puritanism is not properly understood unless its place as a revolt against a dominant materialism is clearly understood.

Much of the preoccupation with religious questions in 1650 was superstitious and superficial, especially among the masses. Of course there was a deep and vital hunger for religious meaning in such groups as the Seekers, but it is well to remember that these were small minority movements. That religion then was a driving and

dominating force in the daily lives and decisions of ordinary people is to be doubted, as it must be questioned for today.

In one important aspect our time is almost a replica of that earlier period. There is now, as there was then, a religious vacuum. And now, as then, there are numerous sects attempting to fill the vacuum. Many people sense that there is no sufficient answer in the popular religious institutions. Although there is no movement called “Seekers” there are countless little groups today that serve the same purpose. Restlessness and disquiet, hope and longing, are as characteristic of this age as of the middle of the seventeenth century in England.

Under the influence of neo-orthodoxy there has developed in our time a modern version of Calvinism. Again we are told that sin is our human lot, inescapable and ever present, and it is the part of wisdom to accept that measure of sin belonging necessarily to our nature as human beings. Though we are to reduce this sin as far as in us lies, we must understand that any attempt to avoid sin entirely involves us in the worse sin of pride. Perfectionism is a word that damns. “Preaching up sin” is as common in many religious circles now as it was in Calvinist groups in the time of Fox.

Salvation, too, is pictured essentially as it was then. Or, more correctly, the way to salvation appears to be the same. There is a more enlightened attitude toward the Bible and toward theological dogma in liberal circles, for biblical literalism is rejected and “myth” is a word used to describe

a story such as the Garden of Eden, but the basic beliefs remain the same. So man is considered to be in a fallen state, controlled by original sin and doomed unless God reaches him in Christ. Man's part is then to accept the gift of God in Christ and, through faith, to partake of the grace that brings salvation. But this salvation, as for seventeenth century Calvinists, is not thought to mean salvation from sin here and now—rather, it is a relationship that means acceptance of us by God in spite of our sins. For those who believe in the hereafter, this is also the guarantee of entrance therein, as it was for the early Calvinists.

It would be an error, of course, to believe that all religious thought in seventeenth century England was dominated by this view, as it would be an error to suppose there are no other voices now. Jeremy Taylor, a Bishop in the Church of England in the time of Fox, wrote *Holy Living*, an extraordinarily eloquent plea for a religious faith productive of ethical choices beyond the Calvinist view. So Taylor in one of his "Sermons" wrote, "We are taught ways of going to heaven without forsaking our sins; ... of trusting in Christ's death without conformity to his life; ... that the laws of God are of the race of giants not to be observed by any grace or by any industry: this is the catechism of the ignorant and the profane." (Jeremy Taylor, *Sermons*, p. 410, Robert Carter and Brothers, New York, 1859.) But Jeremy Taylor's plea for holy living, as contrasted with a forensic concept of salvation whereby men receive salvation by grace and right belief without ethical imperatives, was about as popular as similar calls to holy living are today.

Closely related to this theological view is a general hopelessness today about human nature and about our world that closely parallels the attitude common among people in England three hundred years ago. That the kingdom can come in history is doubted as much today as it was then. We have nuclear weapons to complicate our problem and to reduce our faith in the future, but it is doubtful if the people of that time had any more faith than people today that the future is meaningful and hopeful. And there is a prevalent feeling now, as then, that the future is out of our hands, that we are creatures of forces beyond our control. Perhaps this partially explains a general acceptance of materialism. Enjoyment of what is at hand for the time available is a normal and natural attitude when hopelessness about the future and the world dominates our thoughts.

Although it is necessary to grant the difficulty of understanding correctly a period removed by three hundred years from us, although there is real danger of drawing parallels that are exaggerated, it is reasonable to conclude that the basic religious problems of our age are essentially the same as they were then. If so, then the Quaker message has relevance to our time as it had to that age.

Mysticism and Quakerism

When George Fox is studied against his background, a rather clear picture emerges of a man who, above all else, sought for integrity and purity in his life. Deeply influenced by the Puritan revolt against moral laxity in seventeenth century England, Fox also rebelled against any religious

concept or practice that sanctioned any departure from the highest possible ethical standard. For him only the term “perfection” was adequate to describe the life he sought and believed he achieved. It is for this reason that he may properly be considered the father of the Protestant perfectionist movement, antedating by nearly a century the Wesleyan or Methodist “Holiness” movement.

This thesis that early Quakerism was rooted in an attempt to achieve ethical purity may seem to conflict with the concept commonly held today of the movement as an expression of mystical religion. Some attention to the relation between mysticism and ethical perfection in the thinking and experience of Fox should therefore be helpful.

There are two basic types of mysticism. One is that in which union with God is the final goal of religious endeavor, a state described in *A Guide to True Peace* in these words: “The most profitable and desirable state in this life is that of Christian perfection, which consists in the union of the soul with Infinite Purity, a union that includes in it all spiritual good.... (*A Guide to True Peace*, compiled from the writings of Fénelon, Mme. Guyon, and Molinos, p. 109, Harper and Brothers in association with Pendle Hill.) The self is to be lost in God as the drop of water loses its identity in the ocean. The process begins with purification, is followed by illumination and is crowned by mystical union with God.

This type of mysticism sees the ethical struggle as a means to union with God rather than as an end in itself. Although

ethical purity is required, the emphasis is upon a state of consciousness, upon the knowledge of oneness with God.

The other type of mysticism reverses the emphasis. Holy obedience and ethical perfection, rather than union with God, are seen as the goal. The mystical experience comes as the enabling power by which the goal is achieved or approximated. No trance states or periods of ecstasy are necessarily involved and, if they are experienced, are not ends in themselves. Rather, they are seen as the means by which the individual gains the knowledge and power to live as God calls the person to live.

Always in all religious faiths both types of mysticism are likely to evolve. One type may merge into the other. The same person in different periods of his development may represent both emphases.

But pronounced differences are to be found in spite of this tendency to move from the one kind to the other. Much of the development in the Franciscan tradition fits in with mysticism as a means to the goal of ethical perfection, while St. Teresa, Fénelon, Guyon and Molinos, among others, more nearly represent the mysticism of union with the Divine. The Brothers of the Common Life, a little-known but most interesting precursor of Protestantism, represents the same trend as the Franciscans, especially in the devotional classic, *Theologia Germanica*.

Protestantism has produced less of the mysticism that seeks union with God than has the Catholic Church and much less than have Hinduism and Buddhism. Some of the

middle periods of Quakerism, especially the Quietist Period, produced this type of mysticism, which was somewhat influenced by the writings of such mystics as Fénelon. Usually, though, Quaker mysticism has been closer to that of Protestant pietistic groups—the Mennonites, the Brethren, and the Moravians.

Search for Ethical Purity and Spiritual Power

The functional type of mysticism, centered on the struggle for ethical purity, is evident in the spiritual pilgrimage of George Fox. The early part of his *Journal* is saturated with the problem of achieving victory over sin and despair. One of the first thoughts expressed in the *Journal* is his dislike of the fact that “old men carry themselves lightly and wantonly towards each other” and his determination to act otherwise when he became older. In his youth Fox was unusually puritanical and serious. The mere fact that he felt temptation bothered him greatly, and inconsistency in others pained him deeply.

The incident which marked the turning point for Fox was in itself quite a minor affair. At nineteen years of age, while at a fair, he was asked by two “professors” (nominal or professing Christians) to drink some beer with them. After a glass apiece they wanted to engage in a drinking bout to see who could drink the most, with the loser paying for all the drinks. Fox immediately stopped, paid for the drinks, and was greatly concerned that Christians should act in this way. He spent the whole night walking and praying, unable to sleep because of the matter. He records the result of the hours of travail: “Then at the command of God, on the

ninth of the seventh month, 1643, I left my relations, and brake off familiarity or fellowship with young or old.” (George Fox, *The Works of George Fox*, Marcus T. C. Goulds, Philadelphia, 1831, Vol. I, p. 69.) The specific dating of the event and the belief that God commanded him so definitely suggests that this experience, arising out of dissatisfaction with what he considered to be the lack of moral integrity among his friends, was a watershed, a divide, in his spiritual development.

George Fox cannot be understood apart from a recognition that the driving force in his life at this time was for complete integrity. With a passion that defied logic he demanded for himself and for others a life of holy obedience in even the small details of life.

Finding his spiritual resources inadequate for the task, he first sought help from priests and religious groups. But always the advice Fox received was essentially the admonition to accept and live with human frailties, to give up the search for perfection. This Fox could not do, and the result was despair and hopelessness for a period of some months. “I cannot declare the misery I was in,” he wrote, and “When I was in the deep, under all shut up, I could not believe that I should ever overcome; my troubles, my sorrows, and my temptations were so great, that I often thought I should have despaired, I was so tempted.” (George Fox, *Works*, Vol. I, pp. 73-74.) His loneliness was accentuated by the fact that “professors, priests, and people, were whole and at ease in that condition which was my misery, and they loved that which I would have been rid of.” (George Fox, *Works*, Vol. I, p. 75.)

Gradually Fox came to understand through “openings” that temptation was normal, for Jesus had been tempted also. And the fact that Jesus had been victorious in his temptations, had “overcame him (the devil) and had bruised his head,” provided the key for a solution. The idea of the power of the indwelling Christ to bring victory over sin is the key to a true understanding of the words of Fox that mark the climax of his conversion experience: “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition.”

Thus Fox arrived at mysticism through his inner need of help in a demanding ethical struggle. He believed God spoke to him directly in providing the power to rise above his temptations, to live as he knew he ought to live. Mysticism was, for Fox, a practical, almost utilitarian, divine power that supplemented and buttressed his own will in the struggle against sin. He knew Christ, not as a theological truth, not as a comfortable emotional experience, but as a divine power able to shatter sin’s dominion over man. The “flaming sword” was an expression often used to describe the divine power to divide evil from righteousness and to defeat the forces of darkness. Christ was indeed “a very present help” and it was as such that Fox welcomed him into his life.

This is made explicit in words such as these:

... They who are in Christ, the second Adam, are in perfection, and in that which is perfect, and makes free from sin, and the body of it, and death, and him that hath the power of death, and they come to be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect. And the works of the

ministers of Christ, was to the perfecting of the saints, and thou that dost deny perfection, has denied the ministers of Christ's work, who preach Christ within, and preached every one perfect in him. (George Fox, Works, Vol. III, pp. 440, 441.)

The Content of "Truth"

The use of the word "truth" is important in early Quaker literature. A query once used in some Monthly Meetings asked whether Truth was prospering among Friends. In writing his autobiography, Fox described his first preaching shortly after his conversion: "I went among the professors at Duckenfield and Manchester, where I staid awhile and declared truth among them." The content of this "truth" that he preached becomes evident as Fox records that some were convinced, "but ... the professors were in a rage, all pleading for sin and imperfection, and could not endure to hear talk of perfection, and of a holy and sinless life." (George Fox, *Works*, Vol. I, p. 76.)

The first imprisonment of Fox was a year spent in Derby jail in 1650 and 1651 immediately following the Duckenfield and Manchester preaching and apparently was a result of that mission. Some evidence as to why he was imprisoned is contained in his record of the conclusion of the questioning by the authorities:

... They asked me whether I was sanctified? I answered, yes; for I was in the paradise of God. Then they asked me, if I had no sin? I answered, Christ, my Saviour, has

taken away my sin; and in him there is no sin. (George Fox, Works, Vol. I, p. 99.)

After a few more words along the same line he was thrown into jail on the charge of blasphemy. It is reasonable to suppose that the basis of the charge of blasphemy was the teaching and claim of perfection. Such a claim of purity can rather easily be misunderstood as a pretension of divinity, which was at that time punishable as blasphemy.

In the first words following the recording of the imprisonment, Fox wrote, “Now did the priests bestir themselves in their pulpits to preach up sin for term of life; and much of their work was, to plead for it: so that people said, never was the like heard.” (George Fox, *Works*, Vol. I, p. 100.) Fox was under constant scrutiny, especially by the jailer, to discover some sin in him:

The jailer watched my words and actions, often asking me questions to ensnare me ... thinking to draw some sudden, unadvised answer from me, from whence he might take advantage to charge sin upon me. (George Fox, Works, Vol. I, p. 100.)

When a number of “professors” came to talk with him while he was in Derby prison, Fox recorded that he “had a sense, before they spoke, that they came to plead for sin and imperfection.” (George Fox, *Works*, Vol. I, p. 104.) This same type of conversation is reported many times in the course of Fox’s disputations:

I asked them, whether they were believers and had faith? They said, yes. I asked them, in whom? They said, in Christ. I replied, if ye are true believers in Christ, you are passed from death to life; and if passed from death, then from sin that bringeth death: and if your faith be true, it will give you victory over sin and the devil, purify your hearts and consciences, (for the true faith is held in a pure conscience,) and bring you to please God and give you access to him again. But they could not endure to hear of purity, and of victory over sin and the devil. They said, 'They could not believe any could be free from sin on this side the grave.' I bid them give over babbling about the scriptures, which were holy men's words, whilst they pleaded for unholiness. (George Fox, Works, Vol. I, p. 104.)

Possibly the clearest and most pointed example of the extent to which this issue separated the Quakers from all other Protestant groups of the time is to be found in a dispute in 1674 between a "priest" and Fox. The date indicates that the issue continued to be important and was not confined to the earliest period of Quakerism. The moderate tone of the clergyman delineates a position most Quakers today would probably be inclined to accept in preference to the more extreme position of Fox. Even with a considerate and thoughtful opponent, Fox could find no common ground:

Another time came a common prayer priest, and some people with him. He asked me, 'if I was grown up to perfection?' I told him, 'what I was, I was by the grace

of God.' He replied, 'it was a modest and civil answer.' Then he urged the words of John, 'if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.' He asked, 'what did I say to that?' I said with the same apostle, 'if we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.' ... So there is a time for people to see that they have sinned, and there is a time for them to confess their sin, and to forsake it, and to know the blood of Christ to cleanse from all sin. Then the priest was asked, 'whether Adam was not perfect before he fell? and whether all God's works were not perfect?' The priest said, 'there might be a perfection as Adam had, and a falling from it.' But I told him, 'There is a perfection in Christ above Adam, and beyond falling; and that it was the work of the ministers of Christ to present every man perfect in Christ; for the perfecting of whom they had their gifts from Christ; therefore they that denied perfection, denied the work of the ministry, and the gifts which Christ gave for the perfecting of the saints.' The priest said, 'we must always be striving.' I answered, 'it was a sad and comfortless sort of striving, to strive with a belief that we should never overcome. (George Fox, Works, Vol. II, pp. 157-158.)

This issue separated Quakers from other Christian groups:

... Of all the sects in Christendom (so-called) that I discoursed withal, I found none that could bear to be told, that any should come to Adam's perfection, into that image of God, and righteous-ness and holiness that Adam was in before he fell; to be clear and pure

without sin as he was. Therefore, how should they be able to bear being told, that any should grow up to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ, when they cannot bear to hear that any shall come, whilst upon earth, into the same power and spirit that the prophets and apostles were in? (George Fox, Works, Vol. I, p. 89.)

The Work of the “Light Within”

When we investigate the Quaker concept of the “light within” we find further confirmation of the thesis that Quaker mysticism was accepted as the means to the ethical goal of perfection. No coherent and clear picture of the “light within” emerges from early Quaker writing until it is studied functionally. But as soon as we ask what the “light within” *does*, the lack of clarity mostly fades away.

The first work of the “light within” on the soul of a man who is receptive is to show him the nature of evil, to reprove him for his sin and to produce the conviction that he has been guilty of sin. Again and again in the writings and diaries of early Friends testimony is given to this work of the spirit in the initial stages of their convincements.

A corollary of this first function is the illumination of the content of the perfect life, enabling men to know the answers as to how they ought to live. With almost exasperating certitude the early Quakers insisted that lack of knowledge about the way we ought to live was due only to our unwillingness to heed the divine voice within.

These two functions of the “light within” would have little meaning, though, without the power to live according to the divine standard. Even a cursory study of the literature of early Quakerism will show that the number of times the word “power” or some synonym is used and the contexts in which such words are used indicate the importance of this function of the “light within.” The early Friends were united in believing that human power alone was insufficient for the achievement of the goal of perfection, and they warned against any attempt to take credit oneself for any victories. Rather, whatever they were able to do, they believed, was primarily the result of the inflowing of God’s power into their lives.

A fourth function of the divine light was to bring all true seekers into unity on their understanding of the content of the perfect life. By this means the early Quakers sought to avoid the extreme individualism that they seemed intuitively to realize was their natural danger.

Quaker Testimonies—Standards of Purity

A consideration of the Quaker testimonies brings still more evidence to the support of the proposition that Quakerism historically has been essentially an ethical struggle. Clarkson, the non-Quaker historian, in *A Portraiture of Quakerism*, thus wrote:

Quakerism may be defined to be an attempt, under divine influence, at practical Christianity, as far as it can be carried. They, who profess it, consider themselves bound to regulate their opinions, words,

actions, and even outward demeanor, by Christianity, and by Christianity alone. They consider themselves bound to give up such of the customs or fashions of men, however general or generally approved, as militate, in any manner against the letter or the spirit of the Gospel... They consider themselves also under an obligation to follow virtue, not ordinarily, but even unto death... It is, as we see, a most strict profession of practical virtue under the direction of Christianity... (Thomas Clarkson, A Portraiture of Quakerism, Merrill and Field, Indianapolis, 1870, Vol. I, pp. 1-2.)

While it may properly be said that Clarkson's view left something to be desired as a description of Quakerism, modern Friends should remember that this picture of Quakerism was rather well accepted within the Society during the first 250 years of its existence and was the usual explanation of Quaker testimonies, such as the refusal to participate in war.

Most Quakers today who support pacifism maintain that all human life is sacred and that this is the reason we ought not to kill men, even at the command of a government. While this is a valid reason for our position, it is well for us to be clear that it is a modern emphasis and is not found to any significant degree in early Quaker thought. In fact, although Quakers later came to a more absolute position, in the first ten years or so of Quakerism there was not a clear testimony on the matter of taking human life because of the sacredness of such life as the creation of God. Yet they quite generally refused to fight. The apparent inconsistency is explained when we see that it was the violence, the hate,

the selfishness inevitably involved in fighting that bothered them. Fox was perhaps even more concerned with what violence did to the one who used it than he was with the results of the violence on the person against whom it was directed. This is apparent in his classic and often-quoted words: “I told them I knew from whence all wars arose, even from the lusts, according to James’ doctrine; and that I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars.” (George Fox, *Works*, Vol. I, p. 113.) Fox insisted that “strife is out of the peaceable state.” Typical of many such statements from Fox are these words:

*In Christ, in whom we have peace, purity, holiness, and righteousness, you must be kept holy and righteous to the glory of God, and righteousness, and holiness, and purity, must wear and outlive all that is contrary to it; and patience, and meekness, and humility, and kindness, and sobriety must wear out passion, envy, strife, and wrath, high-mindedness, and loftiness, and wilfulness. And therefore consider, the holy men and women of God must not strive, but be gentle to all; and in that alone keep their dominion... “ (George Fox, *Works*, Vol. VIII, p. 231.)*

Actually the early Quaker approach to war was somewhat like that of monks of the Middle Ages toward both war and sex. It was not so much the end results to which monks objected as it was the inevitable emotions and passions of the acts involved in war and in sexual relations. With Quakers the lines cannot be drawn this way at all on sex and not quite this clearly on the peace testimony; rather, it is a matter of emphasis, and in the early period of

Quakerism the emphasis was quite clearly on the spiritual loss to the person who used violence.

In time the Quaker peace testimony broadened to include the emphasis upon the sanctity of human life and the practical value of world peace. But the origin of the testimony was in the ethical struggle for lives without conscious sin rather than in a philosophical conviction arising out of mysticism or the desirability of the abolition of war. We ought to consider whether our present-day peace testimony is still grounded in a repudiation of the spirit of violence as an unworthy part of our lives.

Another Quaker testimony, the objection to giving honor to men, was the basis of the plain language, the “hat testimony,” and the refusal to use titles. Today the tendency among Friends is to explain these practices as a consequence of the Quaker belief in the equality of all men. Luella Wright, in *The Literary Life of the Early Friends*, writes that “the conception of the innate worth of all mankind influenced them, too, in their refusal to use titles and to remove the hat as a token of deference to their supposed superiors in social rank and office, or to royalty.” (Luella M. Wright, *The Literary Life of the Early Friends*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1932, p. 38.) But this is not the reasoning to be found in early Quaker writings. Rather, it was their conviction that the desire to honor men arose from the selfish motive to flatter others for personal gain and to be flattered in turn oneself. Isaac Pennington admonishes, “Thou who art thus eager in contending for honor, art thou sure it is not the evil part in thee, which doth desire it?” (*The Works of Isaac Pennington*,

4th ed., Sherwoods, New York, 1861, Vol. I, p. 398.) A compliment, according to Fox, is “from below, and is earthly.”

Opposition to the use of oaths is so obviously related to the attempt to achieve ethical integrity that this testimony only needs to be mentioned. The same is true of the testimony for simplicity of life.

Conflicts with Ranters

When we study the conflicts of early Quakers with the Ranters in the framework we have been developing, we see them in a new light. The essential difference between the Ranters and the Quakers was two-fold: (1) the Ranters tended to carry mysticism to a pantheistic conclusion, and (2) the Ranters did not accept for themselves the sternly disciplined kind of life that Quakers sought to live. The teaching of the Ranters that the dispensation of grace freed them from the moral law resulted in blurring the ethical distinctions that were of primary concern for the Quakers. William Penn writes of the Ranters:

For they interpreted Christ’s fulfilling of the law for us, to be a discharging of us from any obligation and duty the law required, instead of the condemnation of the law for sins past, upon faith and repentance; and that now it was no sin to do that which before it was a sin to commit; the slavish fear of the law being taken off by Christ, and all things good that man did, if he did but do them with the mind and persuasion that it was so. Insomuch that divers fell into gross and enormous

practices; pretending in excuse thereof, that they could, without evil, commit the same act which was sin, in another to do; thereby distinguishing between the action and the evil of it, by the direction of the mind and the intention in the doing of it; which was to make sin superabound by the aboundings of grace, and to turn from the grace of God into wantonness—a securer way of sinning than before: as if Christ came not to save us from our sins, but in our sins; not to take away sin, but that we might sin more freely at his cost, and with less danger to ourselves. (William Penn, Rise, Progress and Key of the People Called Quakers, Book I of Penn's Works, Philadelphia, Friends Book Store, no date, pp. 16-17.)

The conflict with the Ranters was one of the most important factors in the development of the conviction among Quakers that the highest possible standard of conduct must be theirs. And it was this ethical emphasis that effectively distinguished the Quakers from the Ranters. This was of considerable importance because of the apparent similarity of their teachings on mysticism.

Pitfalls for Quakers

One of the reasons for the continued vitality of Quakerism has been its ability to transcend its beginnings. In understanding and application of the testimonies that developed out of the Puritan roots of the movement, in the integration of a practical mysticism into its life and worship and in progress in theological thought, Quakerism has grown far beyond its rather narrow origin in ethical

perfectionism. The Friends were not so limited as to let logic exclude the larger truths implicit in their early stand but only gradually evident to them as the years passed.

But it is well for us to see clearly the failures and weaknesses of early Quakerism and for us to face honestly the pitfalls we face today. One of the more important limitations of early Quakerism is to be found in its inadequate psychology and, consequently, in its view of human nature. The revolution begun by Freud is not yet ended. Unless we make a Bible out of early Quakerism, we must understand that the nature of man is far more complex than early Friends supposed it to be. This does not mean a denial of the validity of the insights that gave Quakers an intuitive grasp of some important psychological truths, such as their understanding of mental illness and how it should be treated. But there were still important gaps in their knowledge, especially where the struggle for ethical perfection involved them in strains and stresses beyond the ability of the human mind and spirit to carry.

We know today that too much repression of emotions, even though they may be “sinful” and anti-social, is dangerous. While an integrated personality that makes possible constructive expression of all our emotions is our goal and proper norm, we still must recognize it is better for a person to give vent to his anger and expression to his hatred in a non-violent manner than to push the emotions below the level of conscious thought where they may grow like a cancer. This is not to say that expression of emotions is necessarily desirable, but it is to insist that purity is not to be attained by denying what exists in us. In fact, the

beginning of the cure lies in the honesty to recognize the problem. God does not expect more of us than we can do. We are fallible mortal beings and we live with limitations that vary with different people. The beginning of psychological wisdom is to understand these limitations as well as we can and to avoid placing ourselves or others under more stress than we can deal with constructively.

What is perhaps hardest of all to reconcile with early Quakerism is the admonition from some psychiatrists that striving for purity of heart may produce dangerous tensions in us. Others say that too much concentration on the goal can be self-defeating. For the goal is never as clear and definite as it may seem at times to be, and wise people learn to accept proximate successes and gradual growth. We must learn that relaxation may let the power of God work in us to accomplish what will power alone cannot do. This was recognized rather soon in early Quakerism, with Barclay and Penington both emphasizing that growth in perfection was necessary and possible as a person lived up to that measure of light he had received. So Penington writes that "... a state of perfection doth not exclude degrees." (Isaac Penington, *Works*, Vol. I, p. 392.) And Barclay spoke of a "... perfection proportionable and answerable to man's measure, whereby we are kept from transgressing the law of God, and enabled to answer what he requires of us..." (Robert Barclay, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Friends Book Store, Philadelphia, 1908, pp. 234-235.)

While there is great value in the distant and lofty goal and though we dare not live without it, our eyes must be kept

most of the time on the steps immediately ahead of us. In fact, those who have most seriously emphasized perfection as our proper goal have often cautioned against an obsession about its attainment. John Wesley is a case in point.

Most dangerous of all is the pride that so easily comes, unrecognized, to those who believe they have attained perfection. We can hardly deny that early Quakers too often failed at this point.

In fields such as economics and politics we must admit that the perfectionist tendencies of early Friends led them into mistakes. This does not mean that valuable insights and important discoveries were not also the result of their experiences and thought. Perhaps it will always be true that the price of advance in any field is also the acceptance of the danger of mistakes. Economics and politics were not as simple as the early Friends thought them to be and they are much more complex now. Even perfect intentions are not enough when it comes to difficult problems in these areas. In fact, some of the worst decisions may be made by a person motivated only by love. A country is often better off with an impure but experienced and wise leader than with a foolish saint.

An excellent illustration of the pitfalls to be faced here is in the danger of shipping surplus food to other countries. Though this is a source of satisfaction to those who thus share their bounty, such food under some circumstances may do more harm than good, upsetting normal trade relations and prolonging the solution of the underlying

problem. No purity of motive and intention undoes the harm if the decision is not a wise one. Helping other countries necessarily involves extraordinarily complex problems, often not understood by well-intentioned people who are concentrating on the purity of their desire to extend help to needy people in a sacrificial and loving spirit.

Balance Sheet

No perfection of deed—as contrasted with perfection of intent—is possible in human society where actions and decisions must involve millions of people. Whether we are dealing with poverty, war or racism, the answers are not simple. Sorrowfully we learn we must often accept a solution that may harm some while helping a much larger number. Little steps forward, perhaps even mixed with backward moves, are sometimes the way that the struggle for human decency and value is advanced.

There may be those who will rebel against these warnings and qualifications, claiming they are compromises leading to the destruction of our ideals. That there is real danger of making this mistake must be admitted. But there is greater danger in refusing to recognize the real nature of man and of the society in which he lives. The historic truths of Quakerism must be seen in terms that preserve the essential heritage without violating the insights available to us in social science today. Unless we can reasonably succeed in this effort, it is better to separate ourselves from our heritage than to do violence to the historic meaning of Quakerism.

Even critics will admit there is much in our heritage to cherish and continue. The stubborn fact remains, as it does in any similar survey of early Christianity, that Quakerism in its early years did accomplish moral miracles. For all of their mistakes and errors, Friends did set new standards of integrity. They proved, as did early Christians, that common, ordinary people could find the resources necessary for a standard of life considered impossible by most people. And, quite clearly, they successfully pioneered in seeking solutions to many human problems—prison abuses, slavery, economic exploitation, misguided treatment of the mentally ill, violations of the rights of Indians and the problem of anarchy and war in international relations. While other more sophisticated and worldly-wise people stood on the sidelines, believing these problems to be incapable of solutions, the rash daring and unquestioning idealism of the Friends built a tradition of service to mankind almost universally honored today. Their success far outweighed their failures and went beyond their theories and theology. So does God use men who learn the holy wisdom of abandonment of themselves to Him.

The Power of Worship

An important and basic contribution that Quakerism can make today is a witness to an experience of immediate knowledge of God. This is an essential of our faith. Without God's love and spirit working in us, the ethical struggle will not result in victory. The divine life operating in mankind is the reason for our hope that the world can be viewed without despair, that men can look with eager expectancy to a future in this world that is pregnant with

meaning and value. This is the proper foundation for a hope beyond this world of sense and time. A present world of despair and failure is a poor foundation for eternal values.

This is not meant to be a plea for other-worldly mystical experiences. Those who have never known such times of ecstasy and joy, and even those who honestly question their existence, can still know God in normal human experiences. In fact, there is little evidence from a study of Quakerism to support the proposition that Quakers generally have been mystics in the sense in which the word is usually understood. Thousands of Quakers have felt with certainty, especially in the silence of a Meeting for Worship, that they have known God, but it has often been a quiet certainty without emotional assurance or visions.

To see the divine presence in ordinary human experiences and to feel the uplifting power of God in our noblest impulses, to experience eternal values in the laughter and joy of a child and to know the forgiveness of God in the undeserved love of one we have wronged—these are paths to knowledge and experience of God. And the more sensitive we become, the more all of life becomes a testimony to the presence of God sustaining the world of His creation.

For this belief and experience, men hunger and thirst, and to this truth we point by whatever means are available to us. In the desert of materialism and despair that is our world, there are oases of hope and succor to those who can understand and know that God lives and works with them.

Man—Good or Bad?

A second contribution that can be made by modern Quakerism is a restatement of our faith that human nature has potentiality for goodness far beyond the evidence our world produces today. Of course we dare not deny the frailty of human beings—the tendency to sin and the weakness of the flesh. We plead for no superficial and unrealistic optimism that avoids the deep caverns of sin of which the neo-orthodox speak. George Fox did not testify to the reality and power of the ocean of light until he had sensed the extent of the ocean of darkness as completely as did the Calvinists of his time. We, too, must see with clear eyes the enormity of the sin that curses our world. The utter tragedy of Buchenwald, degrading poverty for hundreds of millions in the midst of unparalleled plenty for a few, the spiritual cancer that is racism, the pride that sanctifies sin in our churches—all this and more must condition and affect whatever we think about human nature.

But we begin to know from modern psychology that there are yet undiscovered worlds in the spirit of man. Without denying the evil that is in man, we remember the indisputable evidence through the centuries of man's ability to love and to share, and we would look toward a future when there may yet be created a world of which we can now but dream.

The poets and prophets walk in where the neo-orthodox fear to tread, asserting with daring faith, "Now are you children of God, and it doth not yet appear what you shall be." Even though we may catch our breath at such an

expression, or at the term “begodded” as it was used by our spiritual ancestors to describe human beings filled with the spirit of God, still we know intuitively that there is, deep within the subterranean currents in us, a power that is divine. Perhaps we shall never be very successful in describing it, and still less certain about any proof, but we know by faith and experience that we are children of God and our destiny is the beloved community rather than barely controlled bestial selfishness.

Though we see in modern psychological research some suggestions that this faith may be well grounded, it still must be admitted it is a faith and not a demonstrable fact to be proven like a geometric theorem. We have our choice of living on the basis of this faith, believing it to be true and living as though it were true, or of living on the assumption that human nature is fundamentally evil. In either case we shall be choosing a faith. For the Quaker the choice is always on the side of qualified optimism about human nature rather than despairing pessimism.

A Religion of Integrity

A third area where Quakerism is relevant to our time is in the search for integrity. The historical roots of our faith in ethical perfectionism are especially important here. For it is the attempt to achieve integrity in all of life that is basic to the Quaker approach. Not merely honesty in our relations with other people, but honesty with ourselves and honesty with God in all of life, is the meaning of integrity in this deeper sense.

Ours is a world that has witnessed a serious decline in personal integrity. The requirements of total war and the demands of political necessity have put a premium upon dishonesty and deceit in a myriad of ways, often unrecognized because they have developed so gradually. A columnist, commenting recently on the attempt to limit the power of a labor leader with a rather questionable record, predicted gloomily, but with rather keen insight, that the probable failure of the attempts at reform would be as much the result of low standards of morality among business men and government officials who deal with the labor leader as it would be due to the immorality of the labor official in question. It is easy for one group to point the finger of scorn at others, but the hard fact is that corruption and dishonesty have spread widely throughout our society.

Even more alarming than the mere fact of the lack of integrity is the respectability and acceptance with which dishonesty is now often cloaked. In academic circles, for example, rules against the hiring of athletes by colleges are often flouted openly. Success on the playing field sanctifies the dishonesty. In business transactions bribery is more and more common, though usually in a form which avoids the stigma of outright dishonesty. Nor should we assume that public outrage when exposure does take place will be more than a transitory protest. The roots of deceit are deep in our society, imbedded in our methods of business and advertising.

But the lack of integrity extends to far more areas than just the matter of business relationships. We rarely bother to pretend that we are practicing integrity in relating our

religious principles to our practice in race relations or to our attitude toward war. The lack of discipline generally evident in our use of time, in our habits of eating, in our expenditures for clothing, furniture and amusements—all of this is a part of the cancer that may destroy the foundation of our society.

It is doubtful that a cause and effect relationship exists between this growing immorality and the prevalence of neoorthodox teaching, with its insistence, with Calvinists of a past time, that we cannot avoid sinning each day in thought, word and deed. More likely, such “preaching up of sin,” as early Quakers would have called it, is the natural accompaniment of the growing acceptance of immorality. Any common practice, even when it is admittedly sinful or destructive of our values, tends to demand and receive social approval and sanctification.

Pendulum swings appear to be inevitable in human history, and the time will come when our society will be ready for the prophetic word and the exemplary deed pointing to a higher standard of integrity. There are limits to the amount of immorality a society can accept and still live. As self-correcting electronic devices regulate machines, as similar controls marvelously maintain our body temperature and perform other indispensable services for us, so there may be the intuitive power to know when survival of a human society demands the curbing of dishonesty and the increase of integrity. If this should be true, then we can look with confidence for more and more people to “hunger and thirst after righteousness.” It was such an awareness of urgent need that explains why early Quakers, despised and

rejected by society as a whole, were the agents by which a new and higher standard of morality came to be practised. Some group needs to bear that witness today and it may similarly experience unexpected receptivity and opportunity in our modern world. That Quakerism today, though so little evidenced in life and power, is held in such generally high esteem may be evidence of this hunger and need. Even our critics generally feel the need to preface criticism by words of tribute (often undeserved, a heritage from the past) to a standard of integrity they say we usually exemplify in individual lives and in our relationships to other people and groups.

For another reason, too, it may be that the Quaker emphasis on integrity will meet an increasing response. Uncertainty and bewilderment is the mood of our time, especially in intellectual circles. Scientific investigation has weakened men's faith in many of the supposed certainties and verities of religion, especially those of a theological nature. The social disintegration of our world has also increased this uncertainty, as faith in our power to build a better world has decreased.

Faced with this loss, more people have turned toward existentialism. If we cannot have eternal absolutes, there yet remains for thoughtful and earnest men such as Albert Camus the satisfaction that comes from the integrity of the moment. We may lack vision of the future and confidence in our destiny, but nothing and no one can take from us the integrity with which we face even apparent meaninglessness. Many will reject such a stand for themselves, but it can scarcely be denied that, like

Descartes' philosophical buttress of doubt, it provides an unassailable position upon which to build a deeper faith.

For such modern seekers, Quaker emphasis upon integrity and the refusal to accept sham provides both a point of reference and an inspiration. There may well be a significant parallel here with the relation of early Quakers to the Seeker movement, composed as it was of people who rejected leaders and institutions. The fact that the people who will be drawn to us by this testimony of integrity will be a widely varied and curiously assorted group should neither surprise nor dismay us, for it is inevitable that any vital experimental movement will evidence such heterogeneity in its adherents, even to the point of inclusion of people who may be hard to separate from the modern counterpart of the Ranters in the time of George Fox.

If this analysis is correct, then the testimony received from early Friends and verified in our own experience—the requirement of personal and social integrity on the highest possible plane—continues to be highly relevant. That we will probably not use such a term as “perfectionism” to describe it, or that we will hesitate a great deal about making any high claims for ourselves is not a matter of concern. Words and professions are relatively unimportant and are often more a liability than an asset in such an area. The reality of a life that refuses to accept and sanctify known evil is the important and essential issue.

The Needs of Modern Quakerism

To diagnose correctly the ethical and spiritual problems of our time and to see clearly the direction in which an answer may be found is obviously essential to a resolution of our dilemma. But it is by no means enough. More important and more difficult is the living of the answer in a complex world society moving through an unprecedented time of transition. It is in the practice of “holy obedience,” as contrasted with theories, where we are inevitably tested.

Any significant human endeavor requires the acceptance and practice of a discipline. What is true of the mastery of the piano is much more true of the mastery of ourselves. We tend to be frightened by the extent of the discipline that early Quakers imposed upon themselves, but our hesitancy about such exacting, even meticulous, standards may be due to our unwillingness to accept a comparable discipline for ourselves. Yet we must know that rigorous attention to details is essential to any meaningful discipline. Contrary to the usual assumption of the modern person, every act and every decision has some relation to morality. And we have not even begun to live a disciplined life until we are ready to scrutinize in the light of God’s revelation to us every detail that makes up the fabric of our lives.

There is another lesson of history that is clear and plain at this point: those who attempt to attain the heights of moral achievement need to climb with other pilgrims rather than to try to scale the peaks alone. Anchorite monasticism, for example, quickly gave way to cenobite monasticism as the monks within the space of thirty years found that the

solitary road to ethical purity was fraught with too many dangers and risks. The weakness of the human flesh and the limitations of the mind are sources of danger to the solitary aspirant to holiness of life. The safeguards in a group relationship tend to minimize the possibility of unwise extremism, of ill-considered experiments, of action too thoughtless of others and of the foolishness too often a part of enthusiasm.

But the group relationship means more than this. We gain enormously in help and encouragement from a close association with those who are sharing with us in the most difficult search man ever attempts. Partly this is psychological, and partly it is a practical matter of the assistance and encouragement we give each other.

Most of all, though, the life of the meeting is essential because through it we receive much of the help that comes from God. For reasons perhaps beyond our knowledge, the divine power is most often and fully revealed to the waiting, prepared, and expectant group. We know this from our own experience, and it is the testimony of virtually all those who have trod this path in the past. This help of the spirit is manifested both in our growing knowledge of the way in which we should live and in the power to make concrete in our lives the truth made known to us by the Light.

The demands on a meeting thus ministering to the needs of its people are quite considerable. Coming together once a week for worship is hardly a sufficient basis upon which to build this life together and with God. We shall have to be

daring and experimental in our modern urban life in finding practical ways in which we study together as well as worship together. And we must find the time and means by which we play and talk together much more than we do. Perhaps we shall also need to share in some way in work enterprises with each other. The lessons learned in work camps and in family camps must and can be applied to the life of our meetings if they are to be truly vital. Pruning our lives to make this possible will follow our decision that such a meeting is of cardinal importance for us personally and for the Society of Friends today.

Finally, if Quakerism today is to do in our time something of what it did three hundred years ago, we must have a world view that relates our ideals to a lively expectancy. This means steering a careful course between Utopian optimism and Calvinist pessimism. Without believing that ultimate goals will be realized in human society, we can believe that God's power works, in cooperation with the efforts of men, to the proximate realization of specific goals. It is in this sense that the Kingdom can come in history and has always been coming. Slavery was abolished, even though segregation remained. In our time segregation can be ended, although personal acceptance of people of other races on an equal basis will not at the same time be everywhere practiced. And we can believe that international warfare will disappear, even though men will still be selfish and aggressive.

The Call

This confidence must be related to a conviction that God calls us to specific tasks meaningful in our time. The fields are white unto harvest, the time is now, and God waits to endow us with power commensurate for our work.

Immediately before us is the colossal problem of international anarchy and war in the nuclear age. And closely related to it is the massive and unprecedented problem of the awakening and industrialization of two-thirds of the world's population. There is the continuation of the work that Woolman pioneered two hundred years ago—the ending of racial barriers. We do not have to set a timetable for these, nor do we personally have to see the particular aims realized. But we must, if we are to live with confidence and effectiveness, believe that God works now with us to the realization of these and other goals in human society.

There come periods in history when changes previously considered impossible become accepted responsibility, when events move with a speed men could not visualize in other and calmer days. Our times require the accomplishment of goals beyond our human strength. But God's cooperation with us can make possible thrilling and dramatic achievements in the coming of His kingdom and the doing of His will on earth.

At such a time we have been called to serve. It is our privilege and our burden to live in one of the momentous periods of history. Chastened and purged in some measure by the events and thought of our time we are possibly better

equipped for our task than any previous generation of Quakers. With confidence in God, and in the knowledge that He works with us, we dare to believe we are called now to a divine-human cooperation in realizing the dreams which poets and prophets have pictured. In this search and task our personal struggle for integrity and our acceptance of a disciplined life are seen in proper perspective as our service to mankind and our duty to ourselves and God.

About the Author

For five years president of William Penn College, Cecil Hinshaw turned to a broader though less specified field of education when, in 1949, he became a free lance lecturer. Since 1956 he has been on the staff of the American Friends Service Committee, and is presently the executive secretary of its North Central Region.

His interest in social action has always been undergirded by the religious vocation of his youth, which was spent in pastoral work and the teaching of Bible and religion. This religious foundation also serves him well in the present pamphlet. It is an evaluation of Quakerism, which, he feels, owes more to ethical perfectionism than to the mysticism often ascribed to it. It was this perfectionism which, above all else, separated George Fox and his followers from the Calvinism of their time. Substituting neo-orthodoxy for Calvinism, the author draws a modern parallel.

Pendle Hill

Located on 23 acres in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, Pendle Hill is a Quaker study, retreat, and conference center

offering programs open to everyone. Pendle Hill’s vision is to create peace with justice in the world by transforming lives. Since Pendle Hill opened in 1930, thousands of people have come from across the United States and throughout the world for Spirit-led learning, retreat, and community.

At the heart of Pendle Hill is a residential study program which encourages a step back from daily life for reflection and discernment in preparation for deeper engagement in the community and wider world. Because spiritual experience is essential to Quakerism, Pendle Hill’s education is experiential, or experimental, at its core. Adult students of all ages come for a term or a year of education designed to strengthen the whole person—body, mind, and spirit. The Resident Program captures the earliest vision for Pendle Hill while responding to the call of the world in which we exist today. Program themes include:

- Quaker faith and practice
- Dismantling oppression
- Spiritual deepening
- Leadership skill development
- Ecological literacy
- Personal discernment
- Arts and crafts
- Gandhian constructive program
- Building capacity for nonviolent social change.

Programs are offered in a variety of formats—including term-long courses, weekend workshops, and evening presentations. Those unable to come for a term or a year

are encouraged to take part in a workshop or retreat. Information on all Pendle Hill programs is available at www.pendlehill.org. Pendle Hill's mission of spiritual education is also furthered through conference services—hosting events for a variety of religious and educational nonprofit organizations, including many Quaker groups.

The Pendle Hill pamphlets have been an integral part of Pendle Hill's educational vision since 1934. Like early Christian and Quaker tracts, the pamphlets articulate perspectives which grow out of the personal experience, insights, and/or special knowledge of the authors, concerning spiritual life, faith, and witness.

A typical pamphlet has characteristics which make it a good vehicle for experimental thought. It is the right length to be read at a single sitting (about 9000 words). It is concerned with a topic of contemporary importance. Like words spoken in a Quaker meeting for worship, it embodies a concern, a sense of obligation to express caring or to act in response to a harmful situation.

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