

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers* 2, 1886 – 1887 June 5, '86 to May 21, '87)

## The Decline of Quakerism

When a religious sect, which has figured in the history of the world ceases to exist, it is interesting to trace the causes which called it forth, and gave it power, and to study those which destroyed it.

The Society of Friends, or as they are commonly called Quakers, presents such a subject. It is true the organization is still maintained, but its membership decreases year-by-year and the signs of speedy dissolution multiply rapidly. To those who have noted the history and progress of the Society, it is apparent that the end is near. – It is not the purpose of this paper to inquire into the truth or falsity of the theological doctrines of the Society, as the success or spread of her religion is not, it is submitted, in any degree dependent on that question. The spread of Buddhism and Mohammedanism, and the religion of Confucius, if we may call it a religion, illustrate this. Nor does the falsity of a religion appear to have much to do with the decline of its organization. For two thousand years Buddhism has held sway over many millions of our race, and after more than twelve centuries Mohammedanism counts more followers than it ever did in its history. It is said by missionaries and others that there are signs that these great religions are losing their hold on the people, and we hope this is true; but it is doubtful if this disintegration is keeping pace with the spread of infidelity and skepticism in Christian countries. It would hardly require twenty centuries to discover that the religions of the East do not rest on a firm basis, nor would any believer in Christianity like to admit that the growth of unbelief in this country and Europe is because Christianity is not true. The causes which operate on religious organizations, and determine their growth and decay, will be found, we think holy independent of the question of the truth or falsity of their theology.

The Society of Friends was an outgrowth of the religious and political ferment of the 17th Century. That period is memorable for its religious fervor and intolerance and for the number of its creeds, sects, and denominations. England was impoverished and exhausted by foreign and civil wars, most of which grew out of the struggle for power between different religious factions. No sooner did one sect secure control of the government than it decreed itself the established church, and filled all the pulpits and livings with its ministers, and commenced a persecution against all who did not believe or profess its creed. The civil and ecclesiastical arms of the government were called to assist the church in enforcing conformity and religious beliefs, and the pillory, whipping-post, and the prison were used to persuade non-conformists of the error of their ways. These persecutions were generally instituted and carried on by the clergy of the established church. The religious establishment was a heavy burden on the people and the system of

tithes for the support of the established church was frequently administered with great harshness. The magnificent churches and palaces of the higher order of the clergy and the most regal state in which they lived, tended to excite the people by contrast, a keener sense of their own poverty and distress, and to lead them to look upon the clergy as the source of much of their suffering: to them the people traced the cause of the long and bloody civil wars, the persecutions for non-conformity, and the burden of taxes. It was under such circumstances that George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, commenced his mission. He was a man of limited education, the son of a weaver, but what he lacked in general information was compensated by the strength and fervor of his convictions. Five years of seclusion, meditation, fasting, and prayer, had prepared him for his work. To use his own words: "I fasted much, walked abroad in solitary places, many days, and often took my Bible and sat in hollow trees and lonesome places till night came on; and frequently in the night walked mournfully about by myself; for I was a man of sorrow in the time of the first workings of the Lord in me." During this period, say from 1642 to 1647, he conceived and elaborated in his own mind, or, as he believed there was revealed to him the peculiar tenets which afterwards formed the religious beliefs of the Society which he founded.

The most important of these was the belief in an Inward Light or Monitor. This belief is, in brief, that every human being that comes into the world there is implanted a sense, a power, or light by which he can distinguish right from wrong. That this inward Light, as it is called, is in fact a divine spark or part of God's Spirit given to man, which, if cultivated and followed, is an infallible guide. It is something more even, than this. It is a sort of medium through which God speaks to man. It is through this he moves his chosen servants to speak, and inspires what they say. In the language of Fox: "This Light and Spirit are the same which were before the Scriptures were given forth, and which led the holy man of God to give them forth." It was also believed that what is spoken through the promptings of this inward Light or Spirit is of the same authority as the Scriptures, but I cannot be contrary to them, because both are inspired in the same way; – both are from God. And it was further held that when people are gathered together for worship, that God alone knows whether it is best that there should be preaching and if so what should be said, and that he prompts his ministers through the Spirit to speak and reveals to them what to say.

As a result of this the Bible was never used in the religious meetings of the Quakers, at least not for 200 years after their foundation. A preacher among them would not permit himself to be seen consulting the Bible as preparatory to preaching, for such a proceeding would be in direct contravention of the doctrine that the sermon is inspired. As a further result of this belief it followed that theological training is useless and even worse than useless; for it causes those possessed of such training to rely on it rather than on divine inspiration. It must not be understood, however that the Quakers did not believe in the Scriptures and hold them in high esteem, and read them: for they did, and members were especially enjoined to read the bible. It was only when they met for public worship that they did not see proper to read from it.

This doctrine of the Inward Light was the distinctive and peculiar religious tenet of Fox and his followers. He and they believed in the cardinal doctrines of Christianity as held by Orthodox Christians, but to these they super-added that of belief in this inward monitor or teacher.

It is true that Fox did not believe in baptism and the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, as observed by most professing Christians. He believed these were merely typical of the real baptism and communion which take place in the spirit when one fully surrenders himself to belief in Christ, and is converted. It is this baptism and communion which in the spirit are enjoined by the Scriptures, and not the gross and visible symbols. The doctrine of non-resistance to violence, and opposition to war under any and all circumstances were taught and practiced by Fox and the Society established by him, but this can not be claimed as new. It was taught by Christ, both by precept and example. Fox merely called attention to it and made its observance obligatory on his followers. He insisted on giving to the teachings of the New Testament in this particular, the same obedience as to other commands. The same may be said of the rule established by him against taking oaths. To these theological doctrines were added certain regulations as to dress, mode of life, language and deportment. These differed only in degree from what we find imposed by other religious sects on their members. They enjoined plainness in dress and mode of life, and forbade all ostentation, display, and indulgence in pleasures and sports. This was not a departure from, but rather a return to the original type of Christianity. A single additional feature of the society established by Fox is deserving of notice; and this is the privileges granted by it to women. They were accorded equal rights with men: the right to preach and to have an independent church government. We believe this is the first instance of complete enfranchisement of women, and the society has never had occasion to regret the step, or question its wisdom.

With these ideas Fox started forth on his work. The doctrine of non-resistance did not restrain him from active and aggressive measures in promulgating his faith. Danger of personal violence attracted rather than deterred him. He went into the fields and preached to the peasant. He traveled from house to house, and from town to town. He entered the churches and engaged in discussions with the ministers and denounced them and their teachings. These intrusions usually ended in his being driven out and beaten. In this way he brought on himself the hatred of the clergy of all denominations. Another favorite resort for proclaiming the truth was the market place; and here he fell into the hands of the mob or the magistrates. He was always ready to enter into an argument with either, but the result of these encounters was that, while he had the best of the logic, he usually came out with a beating or landed in jail or both. Imprisonment however did not check his missionary activity, for he was no sooner in confinement than he applied himself to the conversion of his fellow prisoners and the jailer, "and warning and reproving the priests of the town, and in endeavoring to bring the magistrates who had sent him to prison to a sense of the iniquity of their conduct." No sooner was he brought before the

judges to answer the charge for which he had been committed, then another difficulty arose in his persisting in appearing in court without removing his hat. This he stood ready to defend on all occasions; but it generally resulted in his being sent back to prison. An extract from his journal will illustrate what has been said in respect to his persistency, and the difficulties he encountered:

“I went to Balby and Doncaster where I had formerly preached repentance on the market-day which had made a noise and alarm in the country. On first-day I went to the Steeple house (Fox always spoke of churches as steeple–houses) and after the priest had done, I spoke to him and the people what the Lord commanded me and they were in a great rage and hurried me out, threw me down, and hauled me before the magistrates. A long examination they made of me, and much work I had of them. They threatened my life if I ever came there again; and they would leave me to the mercy of the people. Nevertheless I declared truth amongst them, and directed them to the light of Christ in them; testifying unto them that God was come to teach his people himself whether they would hear or forbear. After a while they put us out (for some Friends were with me) among the rude multitude, and they stoned us down the streets. And inn-keeper, a bailiff, came and took us into his house, and they broke his head so that the blood run down his face with the stones that they threw at us. We stayed awhile in his house, and showed more sober people the priest's fruits. Then we went away to Bolby about a mile off. The rude people laid wait for us and stoned us down the lane, but blessed be the Lord, we did not receive much hurt.

“The next Friday I went to Tichhill, whither the Friends of that side gathered together and a mighty brokenness there was by the power of God amongst the people. I went out of the meeting being moved by God to go to the steeple-house. When I came there I found the priest and most of the chief of the parish together in the chancel. I went up to them and began to speak, but they immediately fell upon me; the clerk up with his Bible as I was speaking, and struck me on the face with it, so that my faced gushed out with blood, and I bled exceedingly in the steeple-house. The people cried, ‘Let us have him out of the church.’ When they had got me out they beat me, threw me down, and turned me over a hedge. They afterwards draged me through a house into the street stoning and beating me as they dragged me along, so that I was all over besmeared with blood and dirt. They got my hat from me which I never had again. Yet when I was got up on my legs I disclosed the word of life, showed them the fruits of their teacher, and how they dishonored Christianity.”

Fox was not long in gathering around himself a host of converts, male and female, who were inspired with his zeal and determination. They went forth into all parts of England, Ireland, and Scotland, copying his methods and proclaiming their peculiar doctrines, and making converts. They also visited Holland, Germany, Austria, France, the West Indies, and the American colonies, preaching, and founding societies. They did not wait for an

invitation nor did protests, objections, or threats avail to keep them away. No sooner was it known that Quakers were stoned or imprisoned for preaching in any particular town than a number of believers to the truth had divine commands to go and bear testimony in that particular town. The zeal of these early converts carried them beyond the bounds of propriety, and caused them to encroach on the rights of others. Their conduct cannot be justified. The character of the age and the extreme cruelty of the persecutions to which they were subjected may explain, if they do not justify it.

The female converts took as active and persistent a part in spreading the new religion as did the men, and they were as little deterred by the dangers and hardships of the work. They were imprisoned, whipped, and executed yet they sought rather than shrank from martyrdom. The career of Mary Fisher illustrates the part taken by women in this religious movement. She was born in the North of England and was an early convert to the cause, and became a minister of the gospel. Feeling called on to deliver a message to a congregation at Selby, she visited the church, and at the close of the public worship she delivered her message and was arrested and imprisoned in York Castle for 16 months. When released, she traveled from place to place preaching. At Cambridge she preached against a ceremonious and stated worship greatly to the disgust of the students, and the Mayor caused her to be whipped at the Market Cross. Notwithstanding this she continued her mission and visited the West Indies and finally went to Boston. Here she was immediately thrown into prison where no one was allowed to speak to her or furnish her with food under a heavy penalty and she was in great danger of starvation. After imprisonment of five weeks she was sent by the authorities of Boston to the West Indies. In 1660 she thought she was commanded to deliver a message from the Lord to Sultan Mahamat IV and forthwith set out for Adrianople in European Turkey, where he was located with his army. She went to Smyrna where the English Consul refused to permit her to proceed, and sent her to Venice. From this latter place she made her way to the headquarters of the Sultan who received her kindly and she delivered her message. Declining an escort of soldiers which the Sultan offered her, she set out alone for Constantinople where she arrived in safety and returned to England.

The trials and sufferings of the early Quakers were not confined to those who went about preaching their doctrines. It was a violation of law for them to assemble to worship and their meetings were frequently broken up and the members thrown into prison. Imprisonment in the 17th century was a serious affair as compared with that punishment of the present day. The prisoners were crowded together in unventilated, filthy rooms without beds or fire and with insufficient food, and were treated with the greatest cruelty by the jail keepers. These imprisonments sometimes lasted for many years. Instances are not wanting where Quakers were kept in prison for 20 years at a time. Hundreds succumbed to the hardships and privations of the prison and died. It is said that during the persecutions of the Quakers in England over 13,000 of their number were imprisoned and over 1 million pounds sterling of their property was taken from them or destroyed. This persecution continued up to the beginning of the 18th century when the enlightened sentiment of the age caused it to cease.

During this long period the Society increased in numbers and influence and no doubt the persecutions contributed largely to this result. It is scarcely necessary to say much as to the effects of persecutions on a religious society. "The blood of the martyr is the seed of the Church." In this country we have had, within the memory of the present generation an example in the Abolition Party of what persecution and intolerance may lead to. With the early Quakers it resulted in bringing forward hundreds of persons who went forth as missionaries with imprisonment and death hanging over them. They were inspired by the danger of the situation with unwonted enthusiasm and courage. It gave to what they said a power that impressed every one who came in contact with them. The danger made a hero of every member of the Society. The persecutions made the missionaries, and secured for them an attentive hearing, and they spread doctrines and gathered in the converts. But however potent a factor the persecutions may have been, we can not assign to them the cause of the ultimate establishment of the Quakers as a religious organization. There were other sects of that time that suffered severe persecution, but they did not survive the period which brought them forth. To the doctrines advocated and taught by the Quakers in respect to human liberty, in respect to war, in respect to certain humanitarian reforms, and against the established church and the payment of tithes, against extravagance and ostentation, and in favor of a pure and simple life must be assigned the first place in the catalog of the causes which led to the establishment of the society. These principles gave point and form to the pleading of their missionaries. The tendency of the age was in the direction of these teachings. The crusade against war and violence must have struck a sympathetic chord among a large class of the community, and especially among the poor. The sentiment in favor of peace inaugurated by the Quakers has grown until it has become a ruling idea in all civilized communities and war is now looked on as an evil and calamity only to be engaged in when all other resources have failed. The opposition to a paid ministry and costly church buildings must have found favor in a community burdened with the payment of taxes and tithes for the support of an enormous ecclesiastical establishment in which positions as ministers of the gospel were sold to the highest bidder, like common merchandise without regard to the fitness of the candidate. The humanitarian ideas advocated by the Quakers such as the abolition of slavery and prison reform were in the same direction. Their protest against power and in favor of individual liberty should not be forgotten. George Fox standing in presence of an English court and refusing to remove his hat was a political event of no small importance. It was a protest against the overgrown power of the government. It was an appeal for, and an assertion of the right of the individual. It was an assertion of the manhood of the citizen. The broad-brimmed hat therefore meant much more in the 17th century than the emblem of a religious order.

To these must be added the rules of the Society against extravagance in dress and mode of living, against ornament and amusements and vanities of every kind. This rule extended to every situation in life and applied to the church as well as to the dwelling-house; it even extended to the grave and forbade a monument. It was a return to the simplicity of the founders of Christianity. It abolished the distinction between the rich and poor or at least promised to do so; The 17th Century was a religious age; the poor man had not yet learned, as he has in our day to do without a creed or a church. He had

begun to feel the degradation of his position. The Quakers offered him a religion and a church where the distinction between the rich and the poor was veiled if it was not obliterated. These doctrines have much in them to recommend them to the people of that age in England and this country, and it is to these in large measure we think must be attributed the success of the Society of Friends and its establishment as a distinct and recognized Christian sect.

What has been accomplished by the Quakers in the cause of human freedom and other great social reforms is a matter of history, and need not be commented upon here. It only remains briefly to enquire into the cause of the decline of this once vigorous religious organization. In their religious tenets the Quakers have remained unchanged since the foundation of their society, nor has there been any material alteration in their rules or principles advocated by them. Soon after the persecution against them ceased they appear to have almost entirely abandoned the idea of spreading their faith and increasing their membership. How this came about is not necessary here to inquire. A feeling of exclusiveness took the place of the early disposition to enlighten the world. So strong did this feeling grow that if application was made to become a member of the society a suspicion arose in the minds of members that the candidate must have some selfish end in view, and a committee was appointed to inquire what reasons moved the applicant. This suspicion was generally well-founded, for the applicant was usually some man who had fallen in love with and wished to marry one of the young lady Friends, which under the rules of the Society he could not do without becoming a member himself. This rule against a member of the Society marrying one who was not a member was particularly hard on the young men who were members and wished to marry those who were not members, for no woman would have it said of her that she had joined the Society for the purpose of getting married, and if the unfortunate young man married outside of the church, he must, under the rules be expelled, or come before the Society and state that he was sorry for what he had done. While this was no doubt the case in many instances, it was most ungallant to admit it. This rule against marrying out of the Society and the absence of all efforts to increase the membership by making new converts may be mentioned among the causes which operated to reduce the Society, but these, we think have not as great an influence as is sometimes credited to them.

The doctrine of the Inward Light or revelation, we think must be mentioned as a source of weakness to the Society in later years. To many men in this unbelieving age it appears to be an effort to give full credence to the doctrines of the inspiration of the Bible; but when it comes to believing not only that, but also in the inspiration of the utterances of the ministers from week to week, it is much more difficult. It is said a prophet is not without honor except in his own country; but in this case the prophet is ever present, and not only one but a host of them. It is difficult to refrain from comparisons between what is said by one with what another says, or with the utterances of the same person at different times. Contradictions and discrepancies give rise to doubts into questions as to whether there may not be some mistake in supposing that the sermons are in fact inspired. This doubt having arisen, the entire foundation of faith is shaken, or at least in danger of

being drowned in question. As stated above, the doctrine of the Quakers in respect to the inspiration of the Scriptures is that they were inspired in the same manner as the sermon of the minute is inspired; and if faith in the present revelations is weakened, the possibilities are appalling to any one having the religious interests of the Society at heart.

But the prime cause of the decline in the Society is no doubt to be found in the fact that the Quakers of today have nothing to offer to the people aside from their theological ideas. Two hundred years ago there was emblazoned on the manner of the Quakers the great principles which were then struggling for recognition; they were in advance of the age in the advocacy of these principles. They were the advocates and leaders in the great reforms of the time. What do they represent today? What have they to offer which the community desire? Absolutely nothing. It is true they are much the same as they were in the early days, but the early days are passed, and with them the wants of that age. In this age wealth has increased enormously, and with it a fondness for display, for dress, and amusements. The religion of to-day is an affair of the rich and those who desire to associate with or be considered as belonging to the wealthy class of society. This is especially true of the Protestant portion of the community, and it is fast becoming true among the Catholic portion. The churches of today afford an opportunity to display wealth and what belongs to wealth. They are a social convenience: a sort of society exchange, and the more they cater for the community in this respect the more successful they are. It may be thought that this is saying hard things about the churches, but is it more than the truth? Let any one imagine either of the fashionable churches of the city shorn of its attractive features of fine music, eloquent sermons and social attractions, attempting to maintain its hold on the community by the force and power of its religious teachings. It would not maintain its hold on the community a twelvemonth. The Methodist Church which, in its inception was almost as rigid and austere in its discipline as the Quakers has shown its appreciation of the demands of the age by reveling in the splendor of its church-buildings, furniture, music, and ceremonies all other religious denominations, and it has survived and prospered. Not so with the Quakers. They have not recognized the altered condition of the times. Like the merchant offers for sale the wares of last year instead of the latest styles, and finds no demand for his goods, they are left behind in the struggle for existence.

The conclusion is sought to deduce from what has been said here is that the Society of Friends was established and acquired its following by reason of the social and political reforms represented by it, and not because of its religious dogmas and doctrines; and its decline in influence and membership is due to the fact that it is not now the representative of any principle which draws to it the people of to-day, nor has it made itself a necessity of the age as a social instrumentality.

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