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A Catholic Looks at Quakerism

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Abstract

In this article Michael Mullet first sketches the well-advertised dissimilarities between Catholicism, the epitome, for many, of 'conservative' Christianity, and Quakerism, which brought to a high point of development the religious radicalism implicit in the Reformation. However, Mullett argues that, underlyingly, *relatively* superficial dissonances over such issues as church order and (more significantly) sacrament, Tridentine Catholicism and Quakerism shared, in opposition to the Reformation's key principles of justification by faith alone and its corollary predestination, an abiding, soteriological and anthropological acceptance (grounded in the Epistle of James) of the role of free will and of justification and sanctification by works as well as faith and grace. Comparisons of texts from Robert Barclay (1676) and the Canons of the Council of Trent (1545) sustain his argument.

Keywords:

Catholicism, Quakerism, Reformation, Justification, Sanctification, Barclay

On the face of it, as two aspects of the Christian tradition the Quaker and the Catholic outlooks could hardly be more antipathetic, seeming to represent the most polar extremes of thought and action. First consider a résumé of Catholicism: it celebrates actualised sacraments and it upholds highly programmed and vocal liturgies, ideally to be accompanied by music and enacted by ministering priests performing vicariously on behalf of congregations which have traditionally been largely passive in their worshipping role; these liturgies have been and are conducted in

some of the world's most splendid buildings, complete with the most opulent images. Catholicism has an elaborate clerical hierarchical ecclesiastical structure, one claiming divine validation. The Catholic Church has actually launched wars and in the middle ages evolved the doctrine of the 'just war', as well as approving and implementing the persecution of dissidents; in its social orientation and teaching, Catholicism has for much of its history been associated with rural and aristocratically controlled societies and has maintained firm alliances between throne and altar; the Catholic Church has also tended towards suspicion of urban, commercial and industrial capitalism. In its theology and anthropology, it has emphasised sin and man's fallen nature. Dominated by a celibate male clergy, it has relegated women to secondary roles.

Look here upon this picture, and on this. Quakerism, conducting its worship in buildings of the utmost simplicity, spurns the outward appearance of sacraments, having neither 'water baptism' nor a physical communion; in the British tradition at least, its meetings for worship are unprogrammed, spontaneous, priestless, musicless and entirely congregational. Quakerism's church order is, if not exactly democratic, entirely consensual, and no claim for anything other than practicality is made for its administrative arrangements. The Friends' peace testimony has been consistent over most of the three and a half centuries of their Society's existence, and they have maintained a witness against all persecution. Now overwhelmingly urban in its orientation, Quakerism has long been associated with enterprise, innovation, capital (ideally with a 'human face'), finance, trade and industry, upholding 'bourgeois' rather than aristocratic values and identified with liberal and progressive social and political movements. In its theology and anthropology, Quakerism tends to optimism, looks for the light within all men and women and accords parity of place to women in its collective voice and organisation.

It will occasion no surprise that Quakers and Catholics have from the beginning adopted attitudes of reciprocated hostility. For example, near the point in time of Quaker's origins, the French bishop and historian Bossuet lumped together the 'Trembleurs' with the 'Sociniens'

(Unitarians) and 'Indépendants' (Congregationalists) as object lessons in the subversive ultimate consequences of the Reformation:

All these people take great pride in their simplicity. They make it their greatest boast to believe only in the symbols of the Apostles. It is out of fear of violating this simplicity that they refuse to [acknowledge] either the consubstantial nature of Christ defined by the Council of Nicaea or the doctrine of original sin, or of Christian grace, or even the redemption and satisfaction won by Jesus Christ (Urbain and Levesque 1965 vol XII:210-211) (translation the author's).

For Bossuet, then, Quakers were heretics beyond heresy, theological anarchists whose primitivism induced them to reject the central doctrines of the Christian faith. Friends looked upon Catholicism with commensurate antagonism, and Fox himself legitimated early Quaker anti-popery. In 1658 when he briefed the controversialists Nicholas Bond and Edward Burroughs in preparation for their involvement in a dispute with a Jesuit, he put to them the proposition 'Whether or not the church of Rome, as it now stood, was not degenerated from the true church, which was in the primitive times, from the true life and doctrine, and from the power and Spirit that they were in?'. Fox himself subsequently took part in the pre-arranged debate, targeting Catholic monasticism, the rosary, the use of images, fasting, celibacy and persecution, and demanding to know 'what Scripture they had for setting up cloisters for nuns, abbeys and monasteries for men, for all their several orders; and for their praying by beads, and to images; for making crosses, forbidding meats and marriages, and for putting people to death for religion?'. At considerable length, Fox also stated his objection to the doctrine of transubstantiation of the eucharist in the Mass, asking 'if this bread and wine, ... was Christ's body, then how hath Christ a body in heaven?'. At the end of the debate, Fox was satisfied he had vanquished the Jesuit: 'his subtilty was comprehended by simplicity' (Fox 1836, vol I:473-76).

Even more vehemently, in 1661 Fox attacked Jesuits as 'filthy dreamers, who dream [they] are the apostles' successors;...'; once more he condemned praying with rosaries 'and to images', along with convents, friaries and monasteries along with religious repression: all these were 'below the law, and far short of the gospel', the outcome of the teaching of the 'evil spirit'. Catholicism's persecution by 'gaols, swords, and staves, racks and tortures, fires and faggots, whips and gallows, to hold up their religion by, and to destroy men's lives about religion' came under attack once more from Fox, in 1665, alongside the notion of papal infallibility (Fox 1836 vol I: 473-75, 553). On that occasion, in fact, Fox set out to demonstrate 'how contrary [the Catholics'] religion was to true Christianity'. A few years later, in 1668, Fox expressed his sharp disagreement with a 'great papist' over baptism by water and, once again attacking Catholic persecution, dismissed belief in Purgatory. Over the issue of transubstantiation, in 1669 Fox deemed the Catholic priesthood actually more idolatrous than the priests of Baal 'who did not eat their god as these [papists] did, and then make another (Fox 1836, vol II:109))

Fox's anti-Catholic strictures were enthusiastically taken up and developed by the Quaker theologian Robert Barclay in *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, first published in 1676. Like Fox, Barclay condemned papists's intolerance and violence, their 'many Massacres' and their determination 'to Persecute, Destroy, and Burn Hereticks,...' (1765:39-40). In their veneration of images, Barclay continued, the papists had in effect 'boldly cut away the Second Command[ment], because it seems so expressly to hit against their Adoration and use of Images; Indeed, in its plethora of rituals 'that *Apostate Church of Rome* has introduced no less Ceremonies and Superstitions in the *Christian Profession*, than was either among *Jews* or *Heathens*; and that there is and hath been as much, yea, and more Pride, Covetousness, unclean Lust, Luxury, Fornication, Profanity and Atheism among her Teachers and chief Bishops, than ever was among any sort of People, none need doubt,...' (Barclay 1765:237).

The vehemence of the Fox-Barclay anti-Catholic offensive was typical of seventeenth-century English Protestant anti-Romanist propaganda, which

mounted in intensity in the year when Barclay's *Apology* was published with allegations of a 'Popish Plot' to destroy English Protestantism. In these circumstances, Barclay's and Fox's attacks on Catholicism should be seen as an affirmation of Quakerism's essential Protestantism, or rather, perhaps of a denial that the Quakers were Catholics. A charge to the latter effect was commonly made from the time of the Friends's rise in mid-seventeenth century England: a widely circulated anti-Quaker cartoon depicted a hybrid Jesuit-Quaker. With their abandonment of Protestant bibliolatry, the Quakers seemed to join the Romanists in finding sources of religious authority outside of Scripture. In fact, though, the real theological, or rather soteriological, resemblances between Friends and Catholics went even deeper than some coincidences in relative diffidence over the infallibility of Scripture, for Quakers and Catholics shared a rejection of the central Reformation doctrines of redemption. This was surely why both Fox and Barclay concentrated their anti-Catholic fusillades on the secondary issues of devotion, persecution, superstition and so on. At the heart of the matter, which was the means of salvation, Quakers and Catholics were closer to each other than either party was aligned to the Reformation mainstream of Lutheran and Calvinist soteriology. Put simply, Quakers shared with Catholics acceptance of the proposition that justification as the prerequisite to salvation came by merit, good works and personal holiness as well as through faith and grace alone. That Quakers held to an un-Protestant acceptance of the salvific efficacy of holiness, especially evident in self-denial, was hinted at in 1661 when Fox was made aware of the fact that 'many Papists and Jesuits began to fawn up Friends', commending them as 'the best and most self-denying people' (Fox 1836 vol I:103-5). Later, in 1668 Fox and a Catholic engaged in an intense discussion of good works. With his crude belief that 'a good life' and 'good works' alone sufficed for salvation, Fox's interlocutor was displaying traits of 'popular Pelagianism', a complacency widespread even in the England of the Reformation about the possibility of attaining sanctification by one's own efforts alone, without grace. Fox corrected this theologically unsophisticated recusant, reminding him of the indispensability of grace, which 'brings salvation, teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly.

So it is not the good works nor the good life that brings salvation, but the Grace.' (Fox 1836 vol I:552). Yet in this affirmation of the vital role of grace Fox was actually bringing his Catholic discussant back into line with the teaching of his own Church, set out by the Council of Trent (1545-63), on the irreplaceability of grace in the economy of salvation:

The Council ... declares that actual justification in adults takes its origin from a predisposing grace of God through Jesus Christ, that is, from his invitation which calls them, with no existing merits on their side;... The causes of ... justification are: final cause, the glory of God and of Christ, ...; efficient cause, the God of mercy who, of his own free will washes and sanctifies, ... (Tanner 1990 vol II:672-73).

Both Fox and the Council of Trent, then, were in basic agreement on the absolute necessity of grace to save. They were also in accord on the transformative power of this saving grace upon its recipients. For Fox, the recipient of grace was no mere 'justified sinner' to whom, in the tradition of Reformation thought, God merely imputed the saving merits of Christ as a credit apart from the individual, an outer clothing only. Fox was convinced that saving grace went to work on the recipient to improve him or her morally and that the divine donor in fact insisted on qualitative change:

The Lord doth command all men every where to repent, and do works meet for repentance. They must show forth that their lives and conversations [conduct], and tongues, are changed (Fox 1836: vol II:522).

The Council's formulation was similar:

... in the justification of a sinner ... the love of God is poured out by the agency of the holy Spirit in the hearts of those who are being justified, and abides in them.

Justification issued in works of righteousness, specifically of charity, for, as the Council ruled,

... faith without works is dead and barren, and in Christ Jesus neither circumcision is of any avail nor uncircumcision, but faith *working through love* (Tanner 1990 vol II:673-4).

The Council's citation in the latter passage of James 2: 17, 20 has a parallel in Fox's definition of the 'TRUE RELIGION', whose consequences were works of charity, 'to visit the fatherless, widows, and strangers,...'. Here the citations from the Epistle of James, in 1:27, were absolutely direct - references, indeed, to that Epistle whose insistence that '... faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone' induced Luther, in his insistence on justification by faith and grace alone, to reject it.

The similarity between Tridentine and Quaker soteriologies, bringing them together as it distanced both from the Reformation norm of justification by faith alone without works, allowed opponents to tar Quakerism with the brush of popery and, as Barclay complained, licensed Quakerism's Protestant adversaries 'to Stigmatise us with Popery, ...' (Barclay 1765:165). Yet it was Barclay himself who saw that the Reformation had lost an equilibrium in soteriology, that '*Luther and the Protestants ... ran into another Extreme, so as to deny Good Works to be necessary to Justification*' (Barclay 1765:167). Or, as the Council decree put it:

... those justified in this way [through faith] ... are ... renewed from day to day by putting to death what is earthly in themselves and yielding themselves as instruments of righteousness for sanctification by observance of the commandments of God and of the church. They grow and increase in that very justness they have received through the grace of Christ, by faith united to good works,... (Tanner 1990 vol II:675).

It was typical of the Quaker awareness of the indwelling Christ that Barclay turned the appreciation of interior transformation outlined by the Council into a more mystically aligned connection between 'forensic' justification and interior transformation:

... the *immediate* Cause of Justification [is] this inward Work of regeneration, which is *Jesus Christ revealed in the Soul*,... (Barclay 1765:169)

Barclay's audacity in making transformation the pre-condition for justification - 'that which formally states us in a Capacity of being reconciled with God;...' (Barclay 1765:189) - took him beyond Trent's more cautiously Augustinian soteriology. Even so, Barclay's insistence on the need for 'inward Holiness', brought him closer to the 'spirit of the Counter-Reformation', with its appreciation of sanctity and of mysticism. And it was, after all, the Catholic historian John Lingard (1771-1851) who knew that George Fox 'was instructed in the real meaning by Christ and the Spirit ... the Spirit moved him to impart the heavenly doctrines which he had learned' (Lingard vol VIII, 1855:242).

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