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Religion and Ethics in the Thought of John Bellers

T. VAIL PALMER, JR.

The lives and writings of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Friends have had an enormous impact on later generations of Quakers. They have also received due attention from church historians. George Fox's *Journal* has achieved a measure of fame as a Christian devotional classic. Beyond this, only two of these early Friends have received significant attention, after their time, in circles beyond the Quaker family. One of these Friends, William Penn, is well enough known to need no further comment. The other one is John Bellers. His writings have had their chief impact on Socialist and Communist thinkers. Robert Owen, early nineteenth-century utopian socialist, acknowledges Bellers as an important source for his thought. Karl Marx cites Bellers in several footnotes in *Das Kapital*; in the most famous of these he calls Bellers a "veritable phenomenon" or a "phenomenal figure in the history of political economy."¹ The revisionist Marxist historian, Eduard Bernstein, develops Marx's footnoted hints into a full chapter on Bellers in his study of radical religious-social movements of the seventeenth century: *Cromwell and Communism*.

What was the source of Bellers's social-political insights, which received such significant attention in later centuries? Quakers today often suggest that the religious experiences of Quakers are the source from which they derive their significant social and ethical insights, including the remarkable, sometimes unique, corporate Quaker social "testimonies." Would this sug-

1. Karl Marx, *Capital*, tr. Eden and Cedar Paul, Everyman's Library No. 848 & 849 (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1930), Vol. 1, p. 527, n. 1.

gestion account for Bellers's social-economic insights? Or would an analysis of his thought point to some other source?

John Bellers (1654-1725), a second-generation Quaker, was the author of a number of writings, most of them proposing specific social reforms: employment for the poor, a council of European states, maintenance of permanent lists of qualified voters, publicly supported hospitals for treatment of the poor and for medical research, education for the children of the poor. Although he directed in his will that his books were to be collected and reprinted in a single volume, this was not done. Robert Owen reprinted his "Proposals for Raising a Colledge of Industry" in 1818.² A. Ruth Fry reprinted substantial excerpts from most of his writings in a single volume in 1935.

Bellers's writings present remarkable contrasts to those of Edward Burrough and other first-generation Friends. The style of George Fox, Burrough, and other Friends of their generation, tends to be turbid, repetitive, and long-winded. Bellers's style, in comparison, is brisk and crisp, with some of his arguments reduced nearly to outline form. Probably few modern readers would require his apology lest "some may think me too short in Expression."³

There is a distinct drop in religious temperature from the thunder and the consolation of Burrough's enthusiasm⁴ to Bellers's calm, even bland rationality and his tendency to reduce all religions to their lowest common denominator. On the other hand, where Burrough's proposals for social action are usually brief and undeveloped, and often seem to be rather incidental outworkings of the basic thrust of his radical Christian theology, Bellers's entire attention is devoted to spelling out in specific detail his proposed social reforms; and these proposals are dotted with remarkable, if occasionally idiosyncratic, insights into the nature of the forces at work in human society.

Moreover, Burrough makes quite different ethical proposals to Friends and to others;⁵ he clearly expects a stricter standard of righteousness within the church of the faithful than among those whom he thinks to be only nominally Christian. In contrast, Bellers often addresses identical proposals

2. For a discussion of the interest of Robert Owen and of Marxist writers in John Bellers, see T. Vail Palmer [Jr.], "A Revisionist Revised: A New Look at Bernstein's *Cromwell and Communism*," in D. Neil Snarr and Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, eds., *Practiced in the Presence: Essays In Honor of T. Canby Jones* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1994), pp. 52-57.

3. *John Bellers, 1654-1725: Quaker Economist and Social Reformer. His Writings Reprinted, with a Memoir by A. Ruth Fry* (London: Cassell and Co., 1935), p. 56 (hereafter referred to as Bellers, *Writings Reprinted*).

4. T. Vail Palmer, Jr., "Quaker Peace Witness: the biblical and historical roots," *Quaker Religious Thought*, Vol. 23, Nos. 2 and 3 (cumulative numbers 68 and 69, June 1988), pp. 40-41 (hereafter referred to as Palmer, "Peace Witness").

5. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

to Friends and to others, and even when appending different covering notes to Friends and to, say, members of Parliament, he uses similar arguments in both instances.

Bellers's religious views can be characterized as rationalist and eclectic in their emphasis. He is concerned to point out what it is that the various Christian groups hold in common. Thus, in making "A Proposal for a General Council of all the Several Christian Persuasions in Europe," he recommends that "first, they should take an Account what Things all the several Religious Perswasions in *Europe* agree in. And then it will appear, That those two Essential Articles of Loving God and their Neighbours, will be two of them."⁶ His tendency to stress the points which Christians can agree on and to avoid religious controversy can be seen in the reasons he gives for distributing Robert Barclay's *Apology* "to all the Parliament-Men, Ministers of State, and Magistrates, &c. in the Nation." In contrast to many early Quaker writings, Barclay's book, "being rather a Peaceable than a Controversial Declaration of our Principles, it finds the easier Acceptance with some that love not Controversy, without publishing our Adversaries Books,⁷ which Books of Controversy do."⁸

Bellers draws with approval on religious ideas proposed by a number of authorities in various ages and places. After quoting a page-long argument from Isaac Newton, he sums it up by commending "this Excellent Philosopher" for his "bright and pure Demonstrations of a *First Cause*."⁹ He quotes for inspiration from the works of the since-forgotten poets, Edmund Waller and Edward Young.¹⁰ He can quote from Solomon and Confucius as joint authorities on the advantages to a kingdom of promoting the work of "Men of useful Genius's."¹¹ Yet another quotation suggests Bellers's appropriation of the thought of two great mystics; he quotes in its entirety "A Short Dia-

6. Bellers, *Writings Reprinted*, p. 99.

7. Typical early Quaker practice, in controversial writing, was to quote in full the objectionable sentence or paragraph from the opponent's document, and then to refute it. In this way, these controversial tracts literally involved "publishing our Adversaries Books," bit by bit, within the Quaker books refuting them!

8. John Bellers, *An Abstract of George Fox's Advice and Warning, to the Magistrates of London, in the Year 1657. Concerning the Poor. With Some Observations thereupon, and Recommendations of them to the Sincerely Religious, but more particularly to the Friends of London, and Morning-Meeting of these Times* (London: Assigns of J. Sowle, 1724), p. 17 (hereafter referred to as Bellers, *Abstract*).

9. Bellers, *Writings Reprinted*, pp. 140-141.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 123, 135-136, 140.

11. John Bellers, *An Essay Towards the Improvement of Physick: In Twelve Proposals. By Which the Lives of many Thousands of the Rich, as well as of the Poor, may be Saved Yearly. With an Essay for Employing the Able Poor; By which the Riches of the Kingdom may be Greatly Increased; Humbly dedicated to the Parliament of Great Britain* (London: Assigns of J. Sowle, 1714), pp. 18-19.

logue between a Learned Divine and a Beggar,"¹² which was originally, as he puts it,

above 300 Years ago, then writ by John Taulerus, and since printed in Doctor Everrard's Works (Part 2d p. 451) who was a Religious Dissenter, in King James the First's Time.¹³

Bellers's own theology or philosophy of religion is summarized on several occasions in his detailing, in philosophical terms, of a number of the attributes of God:

God is from Eternity to Eternity, without Beginning of Time, or End of Life... . He is infinite and omnipresent, ...omnipotent in Power, being able to do all things, ...omniscient... . His Being is invisible, immaterial Life and Spirit, Light and Glory.¹⁴

God only (who is Light) can penetrate Men's Souls, and beholds the most inward Thoughts and Desires thereof...God is in all Places, and fills all things, ...so pure invisible and intellectual a Spirit.¹⁵

The only Wise God, Omnipotent and Eternal.¹⁶

He even concludes an epistle to a Quaker quarterly meeting with a prayer in which God is addressed in similar terms:

Thou Holy, Almighty and Eternal God! Who fills Heaven and Earth with thy Presence. ...Thou know'st our Wants and our Necessities;...Thou inexhaustible Fountain and Fulness of all our Mercies and Blessings! ...

Thy Will, O Lord! is united to infinite Wisdom and omnipotent Power. ... Words are to few, and all the Languages in the Universe are not sufficient, ...fully to set forth the Glory of thy Majesty! the Might of thy Power, Or the Excellency of thy Wisdom! Thou unexpressible Being! Who art GOD over All; Blessed in thy Self for ever and ever.¹⁷

God, to Bellers, is the Creator; but man can play a role in helping to complete his creation. The work of making the lot of mankind more comfortable, for instance, "will be instrumental in God's hand in finishing his Creation (Man being the Head of it)."¹⁸

12. Bellers, *Writings Reprinted*, pp. 155-158.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

14. *Ibid.* p. 78.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

17. John Bellers, *An Epistle to the Quarterly-Meeting of London and Middlesex* (no place, no publisher, 1718), p. 15 (hereafter referred to as Bellers, 1718 *Epistle*).

Bellers's appreciation of philosophy does not extend to the point that, for him, philosophy or knowledge is an end in itself; rather, "the great end of all true Philosophy, whether *Experimental* or *Moral*, is to improve the Happiness of Men, either of Body or Mind, in the Things of *this* World or of the *next*."¹⁹ In light of this ultimately pragmatic statement, it is perhaps not surprising that Bellers should so frequently include pragmatic or prudential appeals at the heart of his arguments for social reform: "Next to the Love of God, and of Vertue, Interest and Rewards are the best Preventions of Vice."²⁰

He can even appeal to London Friends, some of whom, like Bellers himself, could remember their own imprisonments and other sufferings for their faith: "Except we make those Poor our Friends, which we may and ought to take Care of: Such Poor may come to be a vicious and distrest Mobb, and ready Instruments in the Hands of our Enemies to bring much Sufferings upon us."²¹

It will not be necessary here to summarize in detail the nature of Bellers's social-reform proposals. Many writers have done so; in particular, William C. Braithwaite, A. Ruth Fry, Eduard Bernstein, Karl Seipp, and Philip S. Belasco have done so at some length.²² But it will be worth repeating a few of his more remarkable insights, which have contributed to the development of social thought.

One principle emphasized by Bellers in his social thought is the value of human life: "The Life of a Man is of greater Value with God than many Pounds, and ought to be so with Men."²³ More specifically, Bellers suggests that the value of human life, which he thus states in economic or monetary terms, should be expressed in the labor which people perform; in his "Proposals for Raising a College of Industry,"²⁴ he suggests, "This Colledge-

18. Bellers, *Writings Reprinted*, p. 38.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

21. Bellers, *Abstract*, p. 9.

22. William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, 2d ed. prepared by Henry J. Cadbury (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1961), pp. 571-594; A. Ruth Fry, "John Bellers, Quaker, Economist and Social Reformer," in Bellers, *Writings Reprinted*, pp. 5-28; Eduard Bernstein, *Cromwell and Communism: Socialism and Democracy in the Great English Revolution*, trans. H. J. Stenning (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1966 [reprint of 1930 1st ed.]), pp. 253-280; Karl Seipp, *John Bellers: Ein Vertreter des frühen Quäkertums* (Nürnberg: Quäker-verlag, 1933); Philip S. Belasco, *Authority in Church and State* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928), pp. 96-107; Philip S. Belasco, "John Bellers," *Economica*, Vol. 5 (no. 14, June 1925), pp. 165-174.

23. Bellers, *Writings Reprinted*, pp. 76-77.

24. It is difficult to characterize Bellers's famous "Colleges of Industry" according to any simple model. They include some ideas of a modern co-operative community or community of labor, some aspects of a modern paternalistic industry-related community (like Bournville, England, or Hershey, Pa.), and some aspects of a vocationally-oriented boarding school.

Fellowship will make Labour, and not Money, the Standard to value all Necessaries by."²⁵

Bellers was not the first thinker to propose a labor theory of value. John Locke, for example, had already formulated such a theory. Bellers's version of the labor theory of value, however, is formulated in his own peculiar way, which comes closer than does Locke's version to anticipating the later development of this theory as a basic component of Karl Marx's economic analysis. In particular, Bellers is concerned to show how the wealth of the rich has no other source than the labor of the poor: "The Labour of the Poor being the Mines of the Rich."²⁶ "The rich have no other way of living, but by the labour of others; as the landlord by the labour of his tenants, and the merchants and tradesmen by the labour of the mechanicks, except they turn levellers, and set the rich to work with the poor."²⁷

A central point which Bellers keeps emphasizing is to dispute any idea that money can be considered the source of value or of wealth; money is at most a medium of exchange or a measure of wealth:

Land, Stock upon it, Buildings, Manufactures and Mony, are the Body of our Riches; and of all these, Mony is of least use, until it's parted with; ..Mony is unprofitable to a private Person but as he disposeth of it, for something more valuable; ...as Mony increaseth in quantity, it decreaseth in Value in a Country, except the People and Stock increase in proportion to the Mony.

Mony hath two Qualities, it is a Pledge for what it is given for and it's the Measure and Scales by which we Measure and Value all other things.²⁸

At one point Bellers may seem to be suggesting a "population theory of value," at least as far as the source of the value of land is concerned: "It being the multitude of people that makes land in Europe more valuable than land in America, or in Holland than Ireland."²⁹ However, even here Bellers means that a larger population increases the value of land, because it provides a greater quantity of labor to make the land productive; his statement is given as a reason for his argument that putting the unemployed poor to work in England would increase the wealth of the nation.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

27. John Bellers, "Proposals for Raising a Colledge of Industry in all Useful Trades and Husbandry, with Profit for the Rich, A Plentiful living for the Poor, and A Good Education for Youth. Which will be Advantage to the Government, by the Increase of the People, and their Riches," in Robert Owen, *New View of Society*, reprint from edition of 1818, London (New York: AMS Press, 1972), p. 35 (hereafter referred to as Bellers, "Proposals").

28. Bellers, *Writings Reprinted*, pp. 69-70.

29. Bellers, "Proposals," p. 32.

With all of his emphasis on the wealth of the rich as being essentially parasitic on the labor of others, John Bellers does not propose that such wealth should be eliminated. On the contrary, he specifies that the "Colleges of Industry," which he proposes as means of putting the unemployed to work, should be established by the wealthy, who should expect to make a profit from their investment in such Colleges. His reasoning, on this point, is pragmatic: "A thousand pound is easier raised where there is profit, than one hundred pound only upon charity; people readily employing all their estates where there is profit, when they will not give a tenth of it to the poor."³⁰ Profit is stronger as a motive than are love and charity; therefore we have to appeal to that motive, even when we want to accomplish goals that are essentially altruistic: "However prevalent Arguments of Charity may be to some, when profit is joyned with it, it will raise most Money, and consequently provide for most People; hold longest and do most Good: For what Sap is to a Tree, that, Profit is to all Business, by encreasing and keeping of it A-live."³¹

Bellers uses a similar pragmatic argument in arguing for freedom of religion: "There being no Necessity, to force Creeds: but to perswade to Charity; in order to make a Kingdom prosperous, Men good Subjects to their Princes, and Friends to their Neighbours: those Countries and States thriving best where they are most easy about Ceremonies, while the most rigid are much less populous; *Holland* is an Instance of the First, and *Spain* of the latter."³²

To his pragmatic arguments for the establishment of colleges of industry for the poor, Bellers adds an emphasis on the responsibility of the rich: to whom much is given, from them much will be required. Thus he writes to his fellow-Quakers: "We having more Friends of Industry, in Trade and of good Estates among us now, than in any Time since we were a People, and consequently the Account that must be given for those Estates will be so much the greater."³³

At this point, however, we find that Bellers has implicitly appealed to a biblical standard of judgment (Lk. 12:48). Elsewhere his dependence on biblical sources is more open and explicit. Even his appeal to labor, rather than to money, as the source of value is dictated, at least in part, by his attention to the Christian Scriptures: "This Colledge-Fellowship will make Labour, and not Money, the Standard to value all Necessaries by; and tho' Money hath its Conveniences, in the common way of living, it being a Pledge among Men for want of Credit; yet not without its Mischiefs; and call'd by our Saviour, The *Mammon of Unrighteousness*."³⁴

30. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

31. Bellers, *Abstract*, p. 15.

32. Bellers, *Writings Reprinted.*, p. 99.

33. Bellers, *Abstract*, p. 8.

His appeal to Christian revelation even sets limits to his eclecticism; there comes a point where Jesus must supersede any non-Christian authorities, as the moral pattern: "Never mention those Heathen Heroes, such as *Alexander, Caesar* or *Hannibal*, for Patterns to be Imitated by Christian Princes, who Sacrificed the Lives of Thousands, to their restless Ambition and Honour; But let the Holy Jesus, who went about doing good, be the Example for all Christian Princes to Imitate, which will Increase their Subjects, and add lasting Glory to themselves, and a happy Peace to both."³⁵

The extent of Bellers's dependence on the Bible is greatly obscured if one reads only the extensive excerpts from his writings in the volume by A. Ruth Fry. The original printings of his writings frequently include long lists of Bible passages, often quite brief, which Bellers apparently considers relevant to his arguments. The number of clear biblical references, both in the text of his writings and in the appended lists of supporting passages, strongly suggested to me that an analysis of Bellers's use of the Bible might afford some clues to the relationship between religion and ethics in his thought.

In the works of Bellers which I could find, I counted 317 biblical references; 242 of these were from the New Testament, 75 from the Old Testament. Certain books are clear favorites. Bellers quotes 38 times from the Gospel of Luke; other books from which he quotes 20 or more times, in order of decreasing frequency, are the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of John and the book of Proverbs, and the First Epistle of John.

There are four passages which Bellers quotes four or more times each: Luke 16:19-31, six times (the parable of the rich man and Lazarus); Luke 16:9 ("And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations." KJV); Matthew 25:31-46 (the parable of the sheep and the goats at the great judgment); and Acts 17:23-28 (from Paul's speech on Mars Hill in Athens: "God...dwelleth not in temples made with hands; ...and hath made of one blood all nations of men; ...they should seek the Lord... and find him; though he be not far from every one of us." KJV).

The most remarkable aspect of Bellers's biblical references is the fact that a few themes recur frequently in his quotations. His greatest emphasis is on the general theme of the last judgment or of judgment after death; 58 of his quotations reflect this eschatological theme. Bellers does not dwell much, in the references he chooses, on when the judgment will occur: at the moment of death or at the end of history, in the imminent or indefinite future. The theme running through these passages is the simple idea that a future judgment will come.

34. Bellers, *Writings Reprinted.*, p. 39.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Another significant theme in Bellers's biblical quotations is an interest in the poor and the afflicted. Forty-three of his references comfort the poor, condemn the rich, or call for aid to the poor and afflicted. Nearly half of these passages (21) also reflect the theme of judgment, the ideas that the rich will suffer after the final judgment, that final rewards will go the poor or to those who help the poor and suffering in their distress.

Another theme, much emphasized by Bellers, is that of spirit; 49 of his quotations refer to the Spirit of God or to man's spirit. The biblical theme of light is emphasized in 27 quotations. The importance of wisdom, reason, understanding, knowledge is the theme of 27 quotations. The proposition "in" is central to 25 quotations—in the sense that in these passages God or Christ, revelation or the knowledge of God, light or God's Spirit is said to be **in** man.

A significant number of Bellers's biblical references have to do with certain ethical attitudes. Thirty of these passages advocate love—love of the brother, of the neighbor, of one another. Anger is condemned or warned against in 19 quotations.

Other themes appear in the Bible passages quoted by Bellers, but far less frequently than do those I have listed. It is clear, then, that his use of the Bible is highly selective and represents strong, central religious concerns in his thinking. It is not surprising that many of these themes are also emphasized in the text of his writings.

Thus Bellers emphasizes the eschatological sanction for morality, the idea that our behavior will be rewarded or punished at the final judgment:

Happy will those Princes and States be, who shall be Instruments, in settling such a Peace in Christendom, for as it will give them the greater Assurance of Crowns Eternal hereafter.³⁶

Whether at the Great Day of Judgment, where the most secret things shall appear, much more the most publick: There will be any Crime so aggravated, as that of having been an Enemy to Settling and Establishing the Peace of Europe, that might have prevented the destruction of such a vast body of Christians, as then will appear.³⁷

God...made Men in Order to Raise or Create Angels (from such of them as should attaine the Resurrection) or Beings, equal to Angels. ...

Therefore the Raising and Reformation of Mankind to prepare them for that happy State, is the Duty and Business of all Degrees of Mankind; As... the Rich as General Stewards to Employ, and Relieve, and the Ministers to Instruct the Poor and their Children; ...by which making Friends of the

36. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Mammon of Unrighteousness, it will add to the Glory and Happiness of your Mansions, Eternally in the Heavens.³⁸

In introducing his quotation of the "Dialogue between a Learned Divine and a Beggar," Bellers begins, "I shall add the Substance of an Excellent Discourse (as an Addition to mine, Of the Value of the Poor) of a poor Man in *Germany*, above 300 Years ago."³⁹ In light of this introduction and of his emphasis on the poor in his biblical references, Bellers doubtless quotes this dialogue not because of any interest in the mysticism of Tauler and Everard but because of the emphasis in the dialogue on the poor beggar as a fount of religious wisdom.

The themes of light, of wisdom, and of the knowledge of God in man are all reflected in a passage in which Bellers asks, regarding God,

Cannot he cause a Light revealing himself, to spread thro' the inmost recesses of our Souls? ...

He that really believes the Existence of an *All-comprehending, Omnipotent, Intelligent Being*, can he disbelieve even the very probability of his Working thus in our Minds? ...

Is not therefore *Inward Light*, or *Divine Irradiation*, (how weakly or uncautiously soever, some may have explained it) a Doctrine that plainly results, from the Necessary *Omnipresence* of God, and the Intellectual Nature of Humane Souls?⁴⁰

In his "Proposal for a General Council of all the Several Christian Persuasions in Europe,"⁴¹ Bellers urges (in contrast to an earlier similar proposal by Henry IV of France) the inclusion of the Russians and the Turks in the council, on the grounds that "the *Muscovites* are Christians and the *Mohometans* Men, and have the same faculties, and reason as other Men."⁴² Bellers's emphasis on the essential rationality of human nature is also found in the following description of the soul: "The Soul of Man is the most invisible, spiritual, and intellectual Part of this Creation."⁴³ He also insists on the divine source of human rationality and knowledge: "As the *First Being* which created all Natural ones was Divine, so in all Ages and Countries of the World, those *Original Illuminations* in Men, which explain'd the Method of Nature, must flow from that Fountain of Light which first put Nature into Order."⁴⁴

38. Bellers, *Abstract*, p. 3.

39. Bellers, *Writings Reprinted*, p. 154.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

For Bellers, the doctrine of Inward Light implies not only the rationality of human nature but also its nobility and capacity for reform. He writes in a broadside to criminals in prison: "Consider the Nobility of your Nature, being of the same Species with other Men, and therefore capable by a thoro' Reformation to become Saints on Earth, and as Angels in Heaven to Reign with our Saviour there."⁴⁵

Bellers's accent, in his biblical references, on the importance of love in the religious life, comes out in frequent references in the text of his writings to love or charity as one of the prime essentials of true religion:

Every Man may esteem the Value of his Religion in proportion to the Love he finds toward God and his Neighbours, for on those depend all true Religion, and one of the greatest Marks that we sincerely love God is, when we use our Endeavours for the good and happiness one of another.⁴⁶

Since we are become a considerable Body in the Nation, there is a Duty incumbent on this Body, to exert it self in all Christian Offices to propagate Vertue, Charity and Piety among Men; Good Examples being more convincing than Precepts.⁴⁷

At times Bellers writes more broadly of virtue or morality as the essence (from an objective point of view) of true religion: "Immorality in the Professors of any Religion makes them the greatest Enemies and Ruin of that Religion which they profess."⁴⁸

More specifically in such contexts, he sometimes equates charity and virtue with care for the needs of the poor:

The ill Morals and Miseries of the Poor, are scandalous to our Religion to the last Degree, Charity and Virtue being the greatest Ornaments and Excellencies of Christianity.⁴⁹

[George Fox] charged the Citizens from the Lord to take care of the Poor, and as the Charge and Message to the Citizens was then General, so it remains a Duty and Obligation upon the Citizens to all Generations, and more especially upon such as shall profess themselves to be the Servants and People of God... .

A good economy in managing of the Poor, will make us as the Loaves and Fishes which our Saviour blest to a very great Increase.⁵⁰

44. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 164-165.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Charity, love, virtue, according to Bellers, have their foundation in resignation to the will of God, which is the essence of religion from a subjective viewpoint: "*Resignation* (in Love and Humility) to the Will of God, is one of the most Essential *Invisible* Parts of true Religion (as Acts of *Charity* is of the *Visible* Parts)."⁵¹ The heart of the prayer in his quarterly meeting epistle is an aspiration to subject the will to God: "Do thou inable us, O Lord! to prostrate our selves in deep Humility before thee, with our Wills subjected and resign'd unto thy Holy Will in all things, that we may, with Sincerity, say, Thy Will be done on Earth as it is done in Heaven."⁵² Bellers even advises that subjection of the will be made an important part of the education of children: "The will being the greatest enemy a man hath, when it is not subject to the will of God; How valuable is it then for a child's will to be kept under another's direction than its own? It will be the less difficult to submit it to the will of God, when grown a man, especially if season'd with religious lessons of scriptures, &c."⁵³

Bellers's social insights spring from a combination of an understanding of man as essentially rational; a rationalistic interpretation of religious truth; a pragmatic orientation toward human happiness, particularly eternal happiness after the last judgment; and a deep compassion for the sufferings of the poor. What is the origin of these wellsprings of thought and feeling in his own religious life?

Most likely, Bellers drew his deepest insights from his life and experience within his own religious body: the Society of Friends. His basic philosophy of religion and views on human nature are spelled out in a 1699 pamphlet whose title aptly summarizes his approach to these matters: "*Essays About the Poor, Manufacturers, Trade, Plantations, & Immorality, And of the Excellency and Divinity Of Inward Light Demonstrated from the Attributes of God, and the Nature of Man's Soul, as well as from the Testimony of the Holy Scriptures.*"⁵⁴ This pamphlet concludes with a long list of Scripture passages, which he organizes under three headings: "Of God's Manifestation in Men," "Of Christ's Manifestation in Men," and "Of the Holy Spirits Manifestation in Men."⁵⁵ This understanding of the Inward Light as implying a philosophical understanding of the attributes of God and a view of the essential rationality of the human soul can hardly be found in the writings of early Friends during the first decade of their history. On

50. Bellers, *Abstract*, p. 7.

51. Bellers, *Writings Reprinted*, p. 158.

52. Bellers, 1718 *Epistle*, p. 15.

53. Bellers, "Proposals," p. 29.

54. Bellers, *Writings Reprinted*, p. 53.

55. John Bellers, *Essays About the Poor, Manufactures, Trade, Plantations, & Immorality, And of the Excellency and Divinity of Inward Light Demonstrated from the Attributes of God, and the Nature of Mans Soul, as well as from the Testimony of the Holy Scriptures* (London: T. Sowle, 1699), pp. 23, 24, 25.

the other hand, such ideas had appeared among Friends by Bellers's day, notably as one strain of thought in the writings of William Penn, whose association with Bellers on more than one occasion is clearly documented.

Bellers's passionate interest in the plight of the poor may well have its source in a series of actions that do go back to the earliest period of Quakerism. I have elsewhere described Edward Burrough's role in the setting up of organizations to take care of poor Friends in London, particularly by providing employment for them.⁵⁶ In 1671 the Six Weeks Meeting was established in London; this Meeting took over responsibilities for the care of the poor. In 1677 the Six Weeks Meeting instituted a scheme to buy flax and employ poor Friends in spinning it. In 1680 that body appointed John Bellers as treasurer of the funds provided for this plan. This was apparently his first official responsibility within the Society of Friends. He served in this capacity until 1684, when the plan was apparently discontinued. Involvement in this program must have deeply impressed the young Bellers (25 or 26 years old when first appointed) with the sufferings of the unemployed, with their capacity for achievement when given an opportunity, and with the value of providing opportunities for them in the form of specific plans and programs. In 1696, twelve years after the end of his involvement in the flax-spinning enterprise, he published his famous "Proposals for Raising a College of Industry."

This analysis of the likely sources for Bellers's social ethics is borne out by studies I have made of the religion and ethics of three other Quaker writers: Edward Burrough, Jonathan Dymond, and Richard Ullmann. In all four cases, it is clear to me that individual religious experience is *not* the source for their social or ethical views. What does appear to run through all four of them is a grounding of their social ethics in the *life of the Christian community*. I use this phrase in its broadest sense to refer both to the contemporary life of the community, in the writer's own time, and to the previous life of the community, as recorded in Scripture and in the tradition of the church. In Dymond's thought, I found a "basic, unstated premise": "The Will of God is...the final standard of right and wrong, but the fundamental, authoritative source for our knowledge of God's Will is...the *received tradition* of the Religious Society of Friends."⁵⁷ The thought of Burrough, as that of George Fox, is based on an empathetic reading of the New Testament: "Fox and Burrough...had entered sympathetically and imaginatively into the New Testament community and were reliving its sacred history."⁵⁸ Ullmann draws heavily on his interpretation of seventeenth-cen-

56. Palmer, "Peace Witness," pp. 46-47.

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

58. T. Vail Palmer, Jr., "Early Friends and the Bible: Some Observations," *Quaker Religious Thought*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (cumulative number 80, March 1993), p. 44 (hereafter referred to as Palmer, "Observations").

ture Quakerism as a major source for his own theology and ethics.⁵⁹ And Dymond's ethics spring directly out of his involvement in Quaker committee work!

What is the enduring value of Bellers's own proposals? It has been aptly said that his "schemes were always too good to work, but not fantastic."⁶⁰ Surprising insights crop up here and there in his work; but they remain isolated insights, not tied together into any comprehensive system of thought. He thus has no way of sorting out the insights from the commonplace sentiments that also proliferate in his writings. He is, in the final analysis, a second-generation Quaker, with all that implies. He lacks the "fantastic" apocalyptic vision that empowered the first generation. Nor does he have their deep empathy with the biblical writers. For Bellers, even more than "for Penn the Bible seems to have become primarily a handbook, a collection of resources and guidelines."⁶¹ Marx may well have caught the nature of Bellers's enduring contribution to political economy—by summarizing it in a few appreciative footnotes.

59. T. Vail Palmer, Jr., "Religion and Ethics in the Thought of Richard Ullmann," to be published.

60. Hugh Barbour and Arthur O. Roberts, ed., *Early Quaker Writings: 1650-1700* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), p. 451.

61. Palmer, "Observations," p. 48.