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SOME REFLECTIONS ON "THE APOSTASY" AND ECUMENISM

JOHN PUNSHON

Being well past my threescore years and ten, I guess it is time to do a bit of looking back and thinking about what has happened to me since I first saw the light of day before the middle of the last century. This seems an appropriate time, since I have received an invitation to contribute to the last issue of *QRT* under the distinguished editorship of Paul Anderson. I also have no access to a library except my own *ad hoc* collection of books, so I will simply have to write some thoughts about where, as of today, my reflective life as a Friend has brought me.

When I was born, Gandhi, Stalin, and Adolf Hitler were alive and at the height of their powers. There was no cure for TB and only Edwin Hubble dreamed that the galaxies might be receding. Indeed, it was commonly held by respectable astronomical opinion (professors always *know*, you know), that our galaxy was the only one. I have no intellectual memories of the time, of course, but I can remember the atmosphere of life then, whereas younger writers and commentators only have the use of documents on which to base their analyses and conjectures.

But that is by the by. I have also lived through the defeat of fascism and the fall of communism, and I have stood by in amazement as existentialism, phenomenology, structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction have passed across my field of vision.

It is no bad thing for people who make their living with words to be reminded from time to time that language has a mind of its own, and while we may think we are in control, that is not always the case. I have the sense of having lived through a most rewarding period of intellectual life, and while my own basic outlook has not been seriously compromised, I have changed my mind on many things. This essay is about one of them.

I became a Friend in late adolescence. I already had a faith, but I did not have a satisfactory church. That need has been met far beyond any expectation, I have to say. I was fairly well informed in matters

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of doctrine, which did not exercise me unduly, but I was very clear about the kind of community I thought the followers of Jesus ought to be, and therefore the kind of social values they ought to espouse. Again, I was not disappointed, and have drawn great strength from the nature of our Society ever since. In recent years, however, I have come to question some of the assumptions that I have always had. This has made no difference to my faith, but it makes me wonder how significant my questions are, and whether anyone else has been thinking along the same lines.

Not everyone will have had similar experiences to me, of course, but I am sure mine cannot be unique. I have been pondering whether they exemplify a sort of stage theory that some developmental psychologist might recognize. I became a Friend because of the practice. Silent worship satisfied me in a way neither liturgy nor enthusiasm did. I learned that silence was much more than the absence of sound. I found that I could be prayerful without articulating what was transiently in my mind at the moment. But that is just subjectivity—necessary for personal faith, perhaps, but not enough to sustain a community of faith. I would have learned a necessary lesson from this, but not, perhaps, a particularly Quaker one. With the passage of time, however, consciously or unconsciously, I found myself adopting the vocabulary, the expectations, the routines, the attitudes, and the opinions which were expected. I learned the stories and the hallowed phrases. I was absorbed by the culture.

The third stage stole up unobserved. There were reasons why all these things were done or had come to be done. I found out what passed for theology was contained in the book called *Faith and Practice*, and then came to realize that what was *not* said in it turned out to be as important as what was. The Religious Society I joined myself with was a work in progress. It had not always been as it was when I joined it. It was therefore unreasonable to expect that it would remain the same in the future, so change was what I should expect. But what sort of change? Did Quakerism have something definite to say, or was it simply a set of variations on a theme?

Most of the Friends I knew seemed to favor the second alternative, but I had my reservations. Contemporary educational theory, for example, confirmed my suspicions that the therapeutic society was a reality, rating the personal, emotional and intellectual needs of the child above the transmission of culture and the cultivation of excellence. This concern with the subjective is sustained powerfully

by the variety and complexity of postmodern thought, which enables and encourages the deconstruction of the components of "culture" and "excellence," which those brought up in the tradition of Matthew Arnold would argue are the foundation of civilization in its widest sense.

Postmodernism is highly attractive, and so far on its way to becoming an orthodoxy that in some circles its authority tends to be assumed. Two very strong currents converge here. In many places it is assumed that we should greet the influences that have made us what we are with suspicion rather than enthusiasm, and also that our own intellectual and emotional autonomy are of primary importance. My reservations about these things is not that they are in themselves unwelcome, but that they elevate the importance of subjective experience beyond its proper place.

To argue any less is to make it impossible, in principle, to get to stage three in my theory of development. We all need the subjectivity of faith, and probably its culture. However, it is possible to coast along quite happily without entering the third stage, which is the only basis for a corporate identity through time. Problems arise, however when the third stage is discounted, as it tends to be seen in the therapeutic-postmodern condition. This outlook is particularly accommodating to that view of Quaker faith which places all the weight on personal experience. But there is experience and *experience*. Faith-claims have to be evaluated, and this cannot be done on the basis that the intellectual conclusions we come to should be subordinate to the claims they are evaluating. That is obvious nonsense.

Part of my argument here, (perhaps speculation would be a more appropriate word), is that history is real. We may not always agree about what it is telling us, but it cannot be ignored.

Cicero said, "Not to know what happened before you were born is to be forever a child." (and I can quote the Latin for you here, if you like; *Orator Ad M. Brutum* XXXIV 120) He is saying, uncomfortably, that if you remain subjective all your life, you remain at stage one and never grow up. Let us use the jargon and say you privilege feeling over thought. Actually, it is habit (the culture in my little scheme) that comes to limit your subjectivity—the schoolmaster of the soul, perhaps; but it is the thought—the theology, that liberates you.

I would argue therefore that theology, faith-thinking, as it has been defined, is an integral and not an accidental component of the

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religious life. It can be done haphazardly, incompetently, dishonestly even; but properly and honestly done, it does not supersede feeling, habit, and thought but integrates them. We live in a world of people and events not just thought. So making the Society of Friends my church of choice takes me beyond my own preferences and requires me to give reasons for the hope that is in me.

What has aroused these thoughts has been the ecumenical experience. The town to which my wife and I retired a decade ago was built from scratch in the 1970s and is now the size of Fort Wayne, Indiana. At the start, the regional Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops came together and instituted an interesting experiment in denominational cooperation. As the town grew and churches were started, the Methodists, the Baptists, and the United Reformed churches (in UK terms, combined Presbyterian and Congregational) joined the group and it became a partnership. There are now many joint churches made up of a number of permutations to this list. There is a wider Churches Council, to which most other Christian communities belong. Friends are sympathetic to the main group, but are not formally a part of it. I served as convenor of one of its committees for some years, and found that except on very, very rare occasions, denominational identity played no part in the successful running of the partnership. At the same time, on those occasions, my sense of being a Friend can only be described as positive and acute.

So, I have been pondering how this can be. My meeting is a pretty normal kind of liberal, unprogrammed Friends meeting, and while some of us might like to belong to the partnership, I am sure sensitivity to the feelings of Friends uncomfortable with Christian presuppositions would prevent that ever happening. So this raises my problem in an acute form. What is now the nature of the church I joined, and how does it relate to the larger group of Christians in my town? To be more specific, why am I so much at home with so many non-Friends, yet come to a point at which I know I am a Friend and not something else?

There are many who would go back to first principles, and that is a good place to start. When I reached stage three in my youthful quest, I was surrounded by friends who had the answers I lacked. I think we can most of us remember our college and post-college conversations with earnest fellow-seekers. I suppose I remember being stuck between the Catholics on the one hand (this was pre-Vatican II) and the Evangelicals on the other (this was pre-New Evangelicalism—

just about). I loved the church and I loved the scriptures, but its representatives seemed encumbered with baggage of various kinds that I was not about to share. I read George Fox and he offered a new start. I took it.

Joseph Pickvance once told me he thought the sermon on Firbank Fell was a kind of summary, or template of Fox's standard sermon adjusted to meet the condition of the Westmorland seeker church, and that it was a whole lot longer than what appears in the *Journal*. These are the words that spoke, and speak, to me.

I directed all to the Spirit of God in themselves; that they might be turned from darkness to Light, and believe in it; that they might become the children of it, and might be turned from the power of Satan unto God, and by the Spirit of truth might be led into all truth, and sensibly understand the words of the prophets, of Christ, and of the apostles; and might all come to know Christ to be their teacher to instruct them, their counsellor to direct them, their shepherd to feed them, their bishop to oversee them, and their prophet to open divine mysteries to them...

But then there are the words I have come to question. "I declared unto them that the Lord God had sent me to preach the everlasting gospel and Word of life amongst them, and to bring them off from all these temples, tithes, priests, and rudiments of the world, which had been instituted since the apostles' days, and had been set up by such as had erred from the Spirit and power the apostles were in."

Here is an historical judgment, which is of its time, comprehensible in its time, but of questionable utility nowadays, it seems to me. At face value, it reads like a statement many Puritans would have agreed with, but underlying it is a theological position that is still alive and well in all sorts of places—the theory that the historic church, at some point in its history became apostate—a good word, that, of a piece with "traitor" or "renegade"—not something one would want to be. The scriptural sense is the repudiation or abandonment of one's duty to God, which leads inevitably to idolatry and immorality.

That Fox intended his strictures on Firbank Fell to be taken in that way, I have no doubt. Some time before the Restoration, Isaac Penington began his *The Way of Life and Death made Manifest* with the resounding proposition, "That there hath been a great apostasy from the Spirit of Christ, and from the true light and life

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of Christianity: which apostasy began in the apostles days, and ripened apace afterwards.” In the *Apology*, Robert Barclay is rather more historical noting that soon after the death of the Apostles, the inward life of the church “began to decay” and that serious decline set in when “teachers and pastors became the companions of princes” and the virtue, life, substance and essence of the Christian religion was lost, leaving only a shadow and an image. Thus we arrive at the Constantinian shift.

This is not just an academic point. Again, when I came to go beyond the culture and ask what it was based on, I encountered arguments about baptism, communion, and ministry. The scriptural basis for these things seemed fairly convincing to me, unless they could be side-stepped in some way, which of course, a radical apostasy theory allows one to do. Granted a distinction between the visible and invisible church, it was possible to argue that the visible church had lost all connection with the apostolic tradition and needed to be re-established in some way. But how?

To the radical, to reshape and revivify moribund institutions ran the risk of history repeating itself. The church would prosper initially but the cycle would then begin again. Forestalling this possibility, Friends opted for an entirely invisible church, and the reasons seem to me to be sound. There is certainly a tendency for people, and not just Christians, to objectify faith and embody it in institutions and practices of all kinds which tend to lose sight of their origins and purpose and acquire a life of their own. Plainly, this opens the way to external influences, not all of which are benign. The civil power, for example, is dangerous.

Underlying these statements by early Friends, we have the reason for Quaker separateness. Up to a point, the argument is similar to those advanced by reformers of all kinds. Some theological reason had to be found as to why the late medieval church had fallen into what were generally regarded as unchristian ways. It could not be a matter of lopping off branches, for they would grow again. The roots needed to be exposed. And the root was that the church had forgotten its founding principle: the new covenant. Friends—and this is where I think they show their Anabaptist side—fell on the radical side of the Reformation.

So when I arrived at stage three of my development, I found that the reasons many people had for becoming Friends was that they

already had Quaker principles, and I guess that was true for me too. So was what I joined simply a club for the religiously and socially progressive, or something else? How did it come about that there was such a body there to be joined? What was the historical dynamic that made it what it was? Why was it ambivalent about the rest of the churches? Unless we are going to say that the Society of Friends is what we determine it is going to be, it is necessary to move beyond the subjectivity of the times, as I suggested at the beginning of this essay, and to see how well the traditional answers stand up.

We need, in other words, to look at history. This is why I began with a few flippant comments about modern hermeneutics. Reflecting on what I have thought and said and written over the years, I have the sense that I have seldom strayed outside a certain kind of historical discourse. My writing has been directed to Quakerly concerns, naturally, but at the same time has required some acquaintance with the religious history of the Anglosphere and the direction this has been taking over the last few decades. I have therefore radically changed my understanding of the background to the development of Quakerism in the early period, and come to a much more sympathetic understanding of why the authorities were so hard on dissent. They are no longer pantomime villains but serious people fearful of anarchy, the return of Catholicism, or French domination. Friends were not center-stage in Restoration England.

This emphasizes the importance of sociological factors in our estimation of our own religious ancestors. In spite of the significant differences, particularly over church order and authority, between Quakerism and Anabaptism, it does seem reasonable to me to see Friends as the English end of the Anabaptist movement. So why, in English circumstances, did Friends find the apostasy theory so attractive? In the first place, I reckon, because they came from one of the first largely literate economic classes to develop in Europe as feudalism was rapidly giving way to an incipient capitalist economy. Exclusion from political power requires an explanation, and in a politico-religious society, a politico-religious explanation like this one, works.

However, my own feeling is that in general it was a theological spent force. At the outset of the Reformation it made sense, and appears in a number of guises, notably, I seem to remember, in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. But 1640 was not 1540, and in the next half century luminaries like Leibniz, Spinoza, Locke, Boyle, Newton, Wren,

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and all the rest were laying the foundations of the Enlightenment. Rationalism became a far stronger challenge to the established order than apostasy. This is what makes me doubt my own thesis of Quakerism as Anabaptism. In William Penn, I think, we can see growing importance of epistemological themes in theological speculation rather than the socio-political. I like to think of Friends surfing a wave into modernity. But they were stuck with the apostasy.

But that does not dispose of the matter. They could have been right, in spite of the course of events, which may not be determinative of the truth. Indeed, though I live in an effectively secular society, I do not approve of it because it generates long term social attitudes that I believe to be destructive and immoral. So I think I need more than a Marxist analysis of 17th century England if I am going to dispense with the apostasy theory to my own satisfaction and according to the principles I set for myself earlier. So, did the church become “apostate” at some time in the period between the lifetime of the apostles and the mid-17th century? There are two questions wrapped up in this formulation—what counts as “the church” and what counts as “apostasy”?

In his *Journal* (p.419 in the Nickalls edition) George Fox records a long list of just about every religious group active in the kingdom at the time with whom he differed in opinion, and sniffs at the end, “But none of them would confess to the same power and spirit that the apostles had and were in.” That is a good criterion by which to judge answers to each of these questions, and I suspect that Friends generally would have said that this is a practical and not theoretical matter. Catholics, they would have said, turn to the institutional Church for guidance, Protestants to the scriptures, but the proper place is within, the seat of the power and spirit of the apostles.

But whether it is that simple, I doubt, and my reservations have several layers. The first is that the writings we have reflect the circumstances of the 17th century and ours are very different. Simply to take our own terminology and assume that the same words meant the same in the 17th century is a very risky thing to do. Then to take a polemical or doctrinal statement from the time and assume that it has contemporary significance, because the same words are used, is equally risky. Analysis has to come first, and when we encounter a term like ‘the church’ we need care.

Patristics, until recently largely based on the study of texts, is in the process of becoming part of the wider field of classical studies, within which the study of early Christianity is obviously very important. The advantage of this development is that doctrinal matters have a significant place, but are not necessarily of primary importance. While the mental image of liturgical practice in the 17th century was based on seen or remembered Catholic or high church services, and an understanding of the historic church based on the same things, a more rounded understanding would need to take account of Orthodoxy—truly a church in captivity and the experience of the Oriental churches even further east. It would need to understand the continuing existence of heretical or variant Christianities below the patristic radar, and deal with the implications of the conversion of the northern European tribes. One would need to balance, for example, the freedom to practice human sacrifice against the powers of newly converted Christian chieftains to abolish it. The situation is altogether more complex than the simple assertion that "the church" became apostate when its leaders consorted with kings.

For considerations like these, I think the idea that the church was entirely apostate is an overstatement. The late middle ages were in fact the seedbed of the Renaissance, as well as perhaps being the high point of what we might call social Christianity, in which education, healthcare, and provision for the poor and elderly were seen as parish and monastic responsibilities. Indeed, few would quarrel with the nomination of Francis of Assisi as the most admirable figure of the times. That the Reformation was necessary, I have no doubt, and have not addressed myself to the other side of the balance, which is weighty. I simply see a complicated picture, which does not quite measure up to the way we have traditionally characterized it.

But does it matter? Is the historical sense of the apostasy still significant? Well, I think it is, because it seems to me to be the starting point for any sense of Quaker peculiarity. What we know as the distinctives, the things that brought most of us newcomers into the silent assemblies of God's people, were not, at our origins matters of choice, each with its own rationale and appeal, these things represented a collective understanding of testimonies to "the true light and life of Christianity." To change the basis on which they are understood to hang together would be a significant step. It would be to shift the foundation.

It could always be, of course, that this is just the speculation of an historian who gives history too much weight. The foundation may well have shifted anyway. Looking at the present configuration of world Quakerism, I can see a number of places where such considerations would not be of particular importance. To give just one example, the testimony of plainness, or simplicity, can be seen to be a requirement of anybody who thinks seriously about the condition of the planet at the beginning of the 21st century. One can say that the peace testimony and our testimony to truth have never been more urgently needed in the world, and while we may prefer to see them as religious obligations, they are in fact much more widely based in the common perceptions of many kinds of people, many of whom have an active disbelief in the Almighty.

Evangelical Friends, I suspect, would prefer to read the nature of the new covenant out of scripture, rather than find it in personal experience endorsed by the Book. There is a whole new topic for investigation here, but I think such a consideration illustrates that the question of the apostasy can open up some very interesting lines of enquiry into both Friends historical experience and the ways this might relate to present circumstances. If we assume that the theory arose from perceptions of the state of the church and the historical dynamics of the 17th century, we could have the courage to say that we discern something different in our day and age. We should also remember that against the religious grain of his day, Fox considered “believers”—Catholics and Protestants alike—any who authentically put their trust in Christ and were seeking to live faithfully in their settings.

Underlying this essay there is an experience of working with members of other churches and reflecting on our joint experiences. At one point I chaired a committee looking at new forms of ministry and church membership, for in a new and expanding town there is a general feeling that denominational efforts are partial and inefficient, and that new things need to be tried. While we all brought our particular traditions to the discussion, the areas of broad agreement were wide. I had the distinct impression that at any rate among the traditional churches, doctrinal controversy was not greatly significant.

I suspect the reason for this is that Christianity is no longer the dominant culture in the United Kingdom or in the rest of continental Europe. That this is so is undeniable, but the reasons remain matters of controversy, ranging from the residual rationalism of the

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18th century, the social Marxism of the Frankfurt School, and the continuing effects of two world wars. To be any sort of Christian today is to live in a multicultural environment with all that this entails, not least a growing and self-confident Muslim presence. Against this background, we can look to the old answers to see us through, or we can look for something new.

At the beginning of this essay, I spoke of the excitement of new ways of thinking, as existentialism, phenomenology, structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction, and all the rest, have passed across my field of vision. These things are beginning to show their influence in the field of Quaker Studies, and so it should be. This piece is not intended to be an academic article, more a blog entry, written in haste to catch a deadline. It comes from a sense that we are entering a new world, in which the tried and tested will give us a sense of security but will not answer all our questions. It is the *thinking* that counts.