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Quaker Hagiography

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A Response to David L. Johns' article, "Hanging as a Flag: Mary Dyer and Quaker hagiography," QRT #95

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What a splendid treatment of Quaker hagiography, beginning appropriately with one of the Boston "martyrs." The article's in-depth analysis will remain definitive of this aspect of Quakerism for some time. In evidence of that, the only thing I can add is a bit more reflection on the biblical use of the word "saints" and the ecclesiastical development of the concept and connotations of "sainthood," particularly as these developed in the Roman Catholic Church.

THE BIBLICAL USE OF THE WORD "SAINT"

In looking at the scriptural context, I was surprised to find 39 OT uses of the word "saint" (in the KJV). Another surprise was that whereas a variety of epithets (not necessarily synonymous) have been substituted (except in the NRSV) for "saints" in recent translations, the reference as used in the Epistolary greetings often implies little more than what we would consider to be average church members. In that sense, the term is used to encourage the faithful and to affirm their being "set apart" from the world.

In the OT, however, there is more stress on *being holy*, or *being faithful.* In this connection, the REB is distinctive in using "loyal servants" 23 times. "People," "brothers," "faithful followers" are the most common substitutes; also "churches," or the "church in your home" are used. More exotic renderings are "displaced tribes" (James 1:2) and "the elect lady and her children!" (2 John 1:1), and these terms are closer to the actual descriptions of believers than the more general term, "saints." The REB even uses "friends" for James 1:2, although this is not what gives us our denominational name; rather, it comes from the words of Jesus in John 15:14-15.

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ECCLESIASTICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE IDEA OF "SAINTHOOD"

From encyclopedia treatments of our topic we read: "At an early time (in the history of the church) attention was directed to individuals who by deeds and lives of extraordinary piety seemed to reveal the *presence* of the *Spirit* in exceptional fulness."[1] Likewise, "A cult of *martyrs* who died for their faith; and '*confessors*' who survived their sufferings grew spontaneously."[2] Here we see reference to the exemplary work of martyrs and their impact upon the growth of the church.

Nonetheless, the particular identification of those who would be canonized as saints had its own history of development. While the processes by which sainthood was conferred on highly esteemed persons go back to the early chapters of Christianity, these were developed and codified only slowly. As late as the Middle Ages the bishops confirmed, or at least permitted, the spontaneous veneration of martyrs and saints offered by the faithful. Not until 1634, however, did the Constitution *Coelestis Jerusalem* forbid "public cult" of anyone not regularly beatified. Even so, it grandfathered in those to whom "public cult had (already) been paid…for at least 100 years."

There were even different levels of "holiness" conferred upon the saints, and criteria for determining each level were also standardized. Benedict XIV's eighteenth-century codification of the procedure for beatification, for instance, remains substantially that of the modern Code of Canon Law. In the seventeenth century, Urban VIII (reign 1633-1644) had already made a clear-cut distinction between *beatification* and *canonization*, and he reserved both processes for the Holy See.[3] This meant that the Pope had the final word on these matters.

From the early days of the church, a particular danger with sainthood was that it too easily came to reflect the surrounding culture rather than the imitation of Christ or the embodiment of the great figures of Scripture. Pagan worship of the dead also crept in, and these inclinations had to be distinguished from authentic, Christian martyrology. Augustine, for instance, who had become Bishop of Hippo in A.D. 396, and who was himself honored as a saint at Carthage before A.D. 475, found it necessary to warn "that the saints are to revered as *models*, and not worshiped as gods."

Augustine also transformed oblations into appeals "to the saints for their *intercession*."[4] This kept the focus on God, although in seeking to co-opt popular practices, Christianity also was in danger of being co-opted by paganism, itself.

In the Middle Ages there was an "interrelation and equilibrium of two poles…*flight from* the world and *transformation of* the world." It was then, too, that the saints became "models and *patrons* of various professions and guilds," as well as "helpers to be *invoked*."[5] Again, the very strengths assimilated by venerating those who are most deserving can also become liabilities. If we feel we don't measure up, we might feel inferior; and, if the "saints" are too highly valued, this may lead to idolatry.

In recent times, "a new, if less spectacular everyday form of '*Heroic*' seriousness and dedication" has been emerging. *Veneration* is diminishing "in favor of a *more fraternal*…effort to share in the life of the saint," and people come to be strengthened by taking note of the "difficulties and struggles" they have experienced and how they have managed them.[6] With this understanding of their role, "the good and the beatified are less striking," but "the essential is unmistakably clear. It is the *mystery* of the God of *holiness*, whose *power* in *weakness* is heart of all *sanctity*."[7]

REVISION OF POST-REFORMATION ATTITUDES

The terms set off in italics above reflect Catholic terms, and thus some of the vacuum that was created when the Reformation fiercely and completely rejected both the cult and designation of saints. In recent years, however, there has been some recognition in churches other than Catholic ones of the need for *exemplars*, if only for pedagogical reasons. But there is still reluctance to use a term that immediately suggests Roman Catholicism (and to some extent, Eastern Orthodoxy and Anglicanism).

Nonetheless, an adequate synonym for "saints" has yet to be found. Role models is too wishy-washy as a term, and heroes of the faith, with its militaristic overtones, sounds too secular. As for formal veneration and cult, I'm not familiar with the Methodist changes to which Johns refers, but I do know about the Lutheran Liturgical Calendar, which now includes founders of other denominations—but even they don't refer, for instance, to "Saint George Fox." Then

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again, the images of George Fox and John Woolman appear among the stained-glass windows of the Washington Cathedral, so maybe we're not too far away from that.

Personally, I like the term *Quaker saints.* Quaker biographers and historians in particular, and Friends in general, select as subjects of their investigations those whose lives continue to "speak" in world-transforming ways. As "sainthood" relates primarily to being set apart, dedicated to the service of God, Friends emphasize the dynamic aspect of that reality rather than the outward designation of the term. Above all, Friends acknowledge that for guidance and calling to new concerns, Christ Jesus has, indeed, "come again to teach his people himself." It is responsiveness to his teachings and living them out in the world that a Quaker hagiography seeks both to emulate and to convey. Thank you, David, for moving us in both of these directions.

NOTES

1. *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1991), V. 10, pp. 175-177, here page 175.
2. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church,* 2nd ed. (London: Oxford, 1974), pp. 127-128.
3. Pietro Parente, Antonio Piolanti, Salvatore Garofalo, *Dictionary of Dogmatic Theology*, 1st English   ed. (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1951), s.v. Canonization, p. 37.
4. *Schaff-Herzog, loc. cit.*, p. 176.
5. *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) Vol. 5, s.v.   Saints, pp. 394-405, here p. 396, column 2.
6. *Loc. cit.* p. 397, column 2.
7. *Ibid.*