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The Quaker Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

HOWARD H. BRINTON

The Society of Friends arose from an immediate, living experience of the Holy Spirit. This was not a new discovery. It was a rediscovery of a truth shared in some degree by all Christians and specially emphasized by many of the reformers in seventeenth century England. Among these reformers the Society of Friends was unique in making its experience of the Spirit primary and all else secondary. As the Spirit of God is in man to inspire and to guide him this Spirit is the source of every sincere religious act and belief. Nothing in human experience, neither holy book, nor holy church, nor holy state can take precedence over the Spirit of God himself. Therefore, the worship of God requires no human leadership, the Divine Spirit being present as leader. A form of church government based on primacy of the Spirit recognizes no final human authority; God's Spirit is the ultimate authority. Vocal ministry in the meeting for worship should be exercised only under the fresh and immediate anointing of the Spirit. Since the Spirit "bloweth where it listeth" there should be no pre-arrangement to trammel its course. Man is not in a position to designate in advance special types of action or appointed speakers for how can any human being presume to say upon whom the Spirit will call? The Spirit, being of God, has power unlimited to overcome man's sin and render him capable of carrying out Divine requirements. Outward sacraments are unessential if the worshipper experiences spiritual baptism and spiritual communion. If he does not experience the inward baptism and communion, outward signs are empty forms. Because the Spirit is present in the hearts of all, it is by an appeal to the Divine Spirit rather than by violence that men are to be won over to the better cause. In these and in other areas of Quaker faith and practice, belief in the presence of God's Spirit or the Light of Christ in man gives meaning to all

other doctrines. "This," says William Penn, "is the root of the goodly tree of doctrines that grew and branched out from it."

Experience of the Divine Spirit was expected by many persons in various sects and groups in England during the early Cromwellian period because this experience was seen to have been the event of first importance in the early Christian movement. The Bible was then for the first time widely read in England. Its impact was enormous. Many longed to say with Paul, "We have received not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God" (1 Cor. 2:12). The new sects attempted, some conservatively with few changes, some radically with many changes, to adopt a religion closer to that of the New Testament from which the historic Christian Church had obviously departed very far. The Quakers, except for a few small and transitory sects, were the most radical of these groups: the Puritans accused them of reducing religion to pure inwardness and subjectivism.

The first Protestants had eliminated the Church as the means of salvation and source of authority. They substituted the Bible as the final rule. Salvation was to be obtained by response to the Scriptures in faith and trust. How then was the Bible to be interpreted? Protestants and Quakers agreed in maintaining that Holy Writ must be interpreted through the Spirit. Protestantism itself began with a doctrine of dependence on the Spirit and the Quakers could quote the early Reformers in defense of their position. But Protestantism soon took a turn directly away from their original position. The continental leaders of the Reformation, and later the English leaders, too, recognized that this doctrine might lead to religious anarchy. If every man or woman, however ignorant and unlearned, who claimed the inspiration of the Spirit, could interpret the Bible in his own way, the result might be complete confusion. Because of this fear of religious liberty amounting to license, Luther crushed the Anabaptists in Germany who had taken literally the doctrine of dependence on the Spirit. In both England and New England, Church and State spared no effort to crush the Quakers. The suffering endured under this persecution helped to secure religious liberty throughout the English-speaking world.

FRIENDS AVOID ANARCHY

The means by which the Quakers, though positing the supremacy of the Spirit, were able to avoid religious anarchy and confusion is little understood outside the Society of Friends. Historians of Christianity sometimes describe the Friends as extreme individualists. This is a natural but mistaken deduction from the Quaker doctrine that the Spirit takes precedence over Bible and Church. When Quakerism arose there was already a group of religionists in England who based their extreme individualism on the belief that every man is a temple of the Holy Spirit. These people were known as Ranters. Some of their number who joined the Quakers left when a definite form of church government was set up.

The Quakers avoided extreme individualism in two ways. Following the Gospel of John, Chapter 1, they identified the Inward Light with the Logos, the Word of God revealed through the Christ of the New Testament. Since the historic Christ spoke with the same voice as the inward Christ, the outward revelation and the inward reinforced and interpreted each other. If a supposed inward revelation was obviously in disagreement with the outward, it could not be accepted as genuine, but the inward remained primary. It was the essential means of interpreting the written word. The application of the written word to new situations not envisaged in the New Testament was tested by the inward guide. The Old Testament could not be accepted throughout as fully authoritative. It represented a dim twilight before the dawn of the full revelation in Christ.

The second method of avoiding religious anarchy grew out of the experience of the Spirit as inspiring the group, conceived as an organic whole. The revelation of truth to the group took precedence over what an individual might consider to be his own sense of truth. Since the Divine Light of Truth is one and therefore the same in every individual, the closer the members of the group come to the Light, the closer they come to one another. To attain unity in the group a genuine waiting worship and inward searching is prerequisite. This may take considerable time, but decisions on important matters are postponed until unanimity, or at least a fair degree of unanimity, is reached. The individual or the minority who disagrees with most members of

the group has ample opportunity to convince them. This form of Church government which places authority in the group as a whole, rather than in any individual, permits the supremacy of the Spirit within the individuals and also assures a fair degree of order and continuity in the Religious Society. There should be enough individualism to permit a wholesome variety of opinion, yet not so much as to cause disorder and confusion. The Society of Friends has been in its healthiest condition when there has been neither too much, nor too little, uniformity.

Paul's conception of the Church as the Body of Christ, an organic whole, "the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:23) is the basis of this doctrine. Friends, as well as Paul, also use other terms to suggest the same idea as, for example: "the household of God" becoming "a dwelling place of God in the Spirit" (Eph. 2:19, 22). This belief is becoming more prominent in modern Protestantism.

QUAKER NAMES FOR THE DIVINE IN THE HEARTS OF MEN

To designate the Divine Presence in the heart of man, the Friends have used many names, such as Light, Life, Truth, Love, Power, Pure Wisdom, the pure Witness, the Seed, the grace of God, that of God in every man, the Christ Within or Inward Christ, the blood of Christ. These and other terms did not always suggest exactly the same concept though they all refer to some operation or manifestation of the Divine life within the soul of man. God reveals Himself in many ways both outwardly and inwardly. Friends, being in general neither Trinitarian nor Unitarian, could almost be called Multiplarian if their vague and ambiguous theology could elicit a name.

Some of the words for the Spirit are personal and some impersonal, depending on the type of religious experience to which they apply. When Friends sought guidance, they generally referred simply to "the Spirit," without employing the adjective "Holy" as in the phrase "Holy Spirit." When they spoke of the Christ Within, they tended to think of the process of transformation and salvation. This was primarily the work of the Inward Christ as their own experience convinced them. This does not mean that they ignored the work of the outward Christ which, as history shows, has about it a timeless quality extending to the

present and even beyond it. When they spoke of the "Seed" they thought of the divine in a dual capacity. The Light from God (or Christ) shines upon the divine Seed of the Kingdom planted in every human heart according to the parable. For George Fox, the word "Seed" generally referred to Gen. 3:15 in which God declares enmity between the Seed of the woman and the seed of the Serpent. The Seed grows if not too thickly overlaid with the hard earth of sin.

When they referred to the Light it was often thought of as the Light of moral or religious knowledge. When they referred to the Light of Christ, they tended to suggest the doctrine set forth in the first chapter of John's gospel. The Light "which lighteth every man" is the Word of God through which the world was created. From the beginning this Light has been shining into the darkness (John 1:5). In the whole process of its creative work the culmination of its expression is reached in Jesus, the Word made Flesh.

Friends believed that each man is given the Spirit by measure, some in greater measure than others, but everyone can increase this measure by faithfulness. Some, including George Fox, thought of Christ as having received the Spirit "without measure" (John 3:34). Was not Christ himself guided by the Spirit (Luke 4:1, 14, 18)? Modern Friends seldom attempt to be explicit in their Christology, not daring to press the living spiritual event into the confines of a verbal formula. In the early days when attacked by their opponents as not being Christians, they took refuge in orthodox phrases. But they used words which could apply to the inward as well as the outward, whereas their more "orthodox" opponents were generally focusing upon the outward.

The terms "Christ Within" or "Inward Christ" have a warmer, more personal, quality than the more abstract words such as "Light," or even "Life." The same personal quality is characteristic of the "still small voice" of God. The fact that experience of the Spirit is often a personal encounter, sometimes referred to today as an I-Thou experience, is evident from the Quaker Journals or autobiographies. Yet the more impersonal terms, such as the "authority of Truth," are also frequently used. It is not easy to derive definitions from the passages in which

these names for the Spirit appear. Friends did not aim to construct a systematic theology.

The same indefiniteness and ambiguity appear in the New Testament. Paul, for example, speaks of man as "the temple of God" (I Cor. 3:16), as the temple of the Holy Ghost (I Cor. 6:19), and as the being in whom the Spirit of Christ or the Spirit of God may dwell (Rom. 8:9, 10). Paul is a prophet who presents his intuitions of truth as they come to him, with small effort to work out logical consistency. It is possible in Paul, as in Fox, to find more than one theological position. John, the other great interpreter of Christianity, is perhaps a more profound and consistent thinker, but it is difficult to tell in a given case whether he is speaking of the functions of the Eternal Word or the spoken words of the Word made Flesh. The same ambiguity often appears in Quaker writings. The so-called liberal will stress the Eternal Word and the so-called evangelical may tend to emphasize the Word made Flesh, though both are using the same phrases.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN QUAKERS AND PROTESTANTS

The sharp controversy between Protestants and Quakers in the 17th century led each side to believe that it represented a form of Christianity in which different basic assumptions are inherent. Some Quaker writers, including especially the greatest Quaker theologian, Robert Barclay, made comparisons among what they considered to be three main forms of Christianity: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Quakerism. Of the many beliefs in which the Quakers differed sharply from the Protestants of their time the following were important:

- (1) The Spirit which inspired the prophets and apostles who wrote the Bible still continues to inspire men in the same way, but not to the same degree. The Protestants believed that the Bible was produced by a special dispensation of the Spirit which has not continued to the present.
- (2) The Spirit has been given to every man since the beginning of the human race. This Spirit is sufficient for his salvation if he obeys it. Through the coming of Christ there has been a new and greater dispensation of the Spirit

which does away with the older, more formal religion. The Protestants held that God's Spirit before Christ came was a "natural light" which revealed moral truth, but had no redeeming value.

- (3) Since the Spirit is in all men, it is in sinners as well as in the righteous. Fox's command "to answer that of God in every man" meant that the evil man could be reached by an appeal to the Light Within, as well as the good man. The Protestants believed that the Spirit dwelt only in the redeemed.
- (4) The Spirit, if completely yielded to and obeyed, can enable man completely to triumph over sin. The Protestants believed that victory over sin could not be achieved in this mortal life.

All these Quaker doctrines can be derived from the general principle that the Spirit is primary and all else secondary. The same is true in respect to Quaker attitudes toward religious worship and the sacraments, which were radically different from those practised by Protestants. There were other differences of emphasis. The Protestants stressed the atonement of Christ in Jerusalem as the one essential basis of salvation. The Quakers emphasized the redeeming work of the Christ Within to such an extent that they were frequently, but wrongly, accused of ignoring the sacrifice of the historic Christ. They sought to say with Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ liveth in me." This was redemption as far as it concerned religious experience, that is, complete union with the Eternal Christ.

We have spoken here mainly of the Protestantism of the seventeenth century. Modern Protestantism has assumed a wide variety of forms, some of which approximate Quakerism. The Methodists, for example, would agree with the Quakers on the possibility of a victory over sin through the power of Divine Grace. Yet many traces of the old differences persist.

THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT

The Spirit or Light of Christ or that of God in every man has three main functions: source of Truth, source of Power, and source of Unity. As Truth it sensitizes and illumines conscience

and reason. Through prayer, worship, meditation and religious reading, each seeking soul endeavors to gain access to the divine source of Truth. Through these exercises conscience and reason become better guides to right faith and practice. As Power, the Spirit enables man to act in accordance with the Truth revealed to him. Persons of small capacity are sometimes enabled to do great things through the Spirit. As the source of Unity the Spirit may so operate in a group worshipping together as to draw its members into a single whole. Then Christ's figure of the branches united through the vine becomes experienced as a reality. In similar fashion men in their dealings with one another may discover "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of Peace." "All Friends," writes George Fox, "mind that which is eternal which gathers your hearts together in the Lord."

If we examine not the writings of Friends made to refute their opponents but their writings to one another, such as the letters of Fox and others and the many Journals or Spiritual Autobiographies, we find little mention of the historical events with which the Christian religion began, but a fervent call to obedience to the Will of God as revealed within, by whatever name this Divine element may be called. Journals of the 17th and 18th centuries are, in general, more theocentric than Christocentric. Descriptions of meetings for worship attended by these travelling ministers occupy large parts of their narrative. The objective in worship, as they describe it, is "to search after God that we might find Him and feel Him." The sermons they preached were not expositions of doctrine but calls to heed "the admonitions of the Spirit." Many of these early ministers had what they called "close work," which means that they felt compelled to admonish their hearers for behavior inconsistent with Quaker principles.

Their faithful, painfully accurate records of religious experience during the middle period of Quakerism are our best clues to the character of the Quaker type of religion in its most mature form. In the early period, during the seventeenth century, the religious excitement of the time, sometimes even bordering on fanaticism, the desperate struggle against persecution which deprived the Society of Friends of most of its leaders, and the inner lack of cohesion in belief and practice characteristic of any new undeveloped movement, produced much that was unrepresentative.

sentative. In the nineteenth century, outside influences both from rationalistic and evangelical sources also produced extreme positions resulting in tensions and, in America, divisions. But the middle period during the eighteenth century, revealed in such journals as those of John Churchman, Joshua Evans, Catherine Phillips, Martha Routh, Job Scott, John Woolman, and many others shows a ripening of Quakerism in lives subordinated to the requirements of the Spirit. While these Journals do not present a clear-cut doctrine of the Holy Spirit and its relation to God or Christ, they do reveal saintly lives guided and permeated by the Divine life.