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A Still More Catholic Quakerism

KELVIN VAN NUYS

Of the various claims for "The Future of Quakerism" made in the Autumn 1966 issue of *Quaker Religious Thought*, let me restate the highest ones: Quakerism as a vanguard, heading the creative advance of Christianity — or even of the general religious quest; and "Catholic Quakerism," an all-sided, inclusive religion, adequate to the whole of human needs. Roland Bainton remarks that Quakerism can only claim to unique adequacy through being a "combination of ingredients, each discoverable somewhere else." Everett Cattell admits that Quakerism won't become the answer by any amount of re-examination of heritage alone, but that God is looking for a people who have a deeper understanding of the "agonies of today's questions." Maurice Creasey says we need "something much deeper than a unanimous doctrinal statement or an agreed program of action. It is a vision of . . . response . . . to the needs of the present time." Lewis Benson and Canby Jones stress the need of a "new and dynamic understanding."

These statements seem to show readiness for creative response to new needs and for new inclusions. My only question is whether they are "catholic" enough to envisage incorporation of our scientific world-view at the cost of reconstruction not to Luther's, not to Wesley's, not to Fox's degree, but to Paul's and Augustine's degree. That means going *back* of Paul and Augustine to change their assumptions of Greek static philosophy, which Protestant reformers never touched. It means reconsidering such ideas as "perfect being," dualism between spirit and matter, evil as privation, predestination, God as pre-eminently concerned with original or final perfection. But it also means *sounder* support for some other orthodox claims: cosmic theism, God as active in history, concrete revelation, sin and salvation, to name a few.

Quakerism of all sects has the best grounds for working at solutions that are not just "returns" or "recoveries," but are genuinely creative. But although Canby Jones' review of Lewis Benson's *Catholic Quakerism* speaks of "new and dynamic understanding," it is, mainly, of "the origins of the Quaker movement," and there is an insistence on the, at first sight, non-creative categories of "obedience" and "perfection." The other writers in the Autumn 1966 issue seem to be thinking primarily of specifically religious sources and social questions for Quakerism's expanded pioneering. Only Harold Loukes is quoted as mentioning the necessity for "theory," for theology, for "ratiocination" which "Friends have not significantly engaged in." This "neglect of general principles [is] the Quaker weakness," he admits. But then he goes on to emphasize the unique, special message of Quakerism, rather than its inclusive one. So I remain unsure whether anyone is sufficiently explicit about the need of being catholic with the greatest body of cumulative, structured knowledge man has ever possessed.

I have become convinced that the scientific world-view in its most modern dynamic formulation has changed from being a threat to religious affirmations to being a better foundation for them than man has ever had. It is likely that the central event of modern history is the dynamizing of basic categories of thought, fact, and value. Quakerism, I believe, cannot be released from the task of making a much more thorough-going peace with evolutionary and relativistic, Einsteinian science than it has yet done. There are also in this "process metaphysics" tools for rapprochement between humanistic and theistic-Christological minds promising that each, with modification, might include both the valid claims of the other and this world-picture of dynamic science.

For Quakerism really to be a catholic vanguard for religion in our day, it must have answers to some pressing modern questions — which it, and Christianity in general, have heretofore just taken for granted, or condemned, or answered glibly with such phrases as "incomprehensible paradox" and "divine mystery." Perhaps the two most insistent questions are: why, if there is an omnipotent God, would he create an imperfect,

evolving world, and why would he create man as a biological creature with his very spirit involved in protoplasmic structures?

A theology more thoroughly in tune with the science of fields of energy, organism, and creativity, though out of tune with Greek philosophy, would be able to support many traditional and Quaker beliefs, which I will itemize below. It gets to these beliefs by a route that humanists can accept (only they don't pursue it to the end); and it makes evangelicals face up to what "omnipotence" when taken together with "sin and salvation" really implies, which they too fail to pursue to the end.

I am asserting, then, that the modern intellectual scene demands of any current religion of power, changes in thought-modes as fundamental as those made by Paul and Augustine. That is, it demands the deportation of Greek static science which they imported into Christianity, and a more thorough deportation than orthodox, existentialist, or positivist has yet accomplished.

The main reason is this: the static starting-point always gives us a God and a Christ grappling with evil and change they never intended. Modern man is through with all gods who are described as having intended static perfection either first or last, but who find themselves caught in a dynamically imperfect world of effort and transformation instead. Modern man is also through with the supposed explanation that this situation is entirely man's fault, through his freely chosen fall. Psychology proves to our satisfaction that man was not perfect in origin, nor could he help it.

On our campus we have recently seen Brecht's play, *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, complaining once more, as Western literature has been doing for a century, of gods who propose absolute perfection as man's origin and goal, but have no real answer why or how "good women" (or men) find themselves trapped in evil, forced by life into strategies that mix softness and toughness, vice and virtue, ambiguous experimenting. Once again this play rejects the thesis that any god could have meant man to be in problems, experimenting for solutions; that the little processes of partial resolutions, and the big process of redemptive transformation, are themselves what God purposely intended to create. God intended neither the

original innocence of Adam nor final saintly perfection, but the creativity itself. If God meant that, then He had to have meant disorder, evil, created it on purpose. This thought has been touched upon again and again, by Job, Boehme, Blake, Fichte, Goethe, D. H. Lawrence, Jung, Dewey, Whitehead, but never accepted by any official Christian body as part and parcel of any possible theodicy. Back to static Greek substance, to Aristotelian immutable perfect divinity, has all Christian thought run in the pinch, to raise unanswerably the problem of evil over again, and to multiply the skeptics and atheists whom it has taught ever to demand static perfection in God's work, before they will believe.

Quakerism is worst of all. Perfection has been its favorite word! (Lewis Benson's and Canby Jones' "perfectability" is not so bad, if they would be very careful to mean continuous transformation for the better, but not no-further-work.) Quaker perfectionism and Niebuhrian realism have been in an unnecessary fight for decades for lack of a truly dynamic theory of value, which could easily include both emphases. The Niebuhrian approach, in its extreme fear that the slightest thought of perfection will tempt you to claim it, thus committing the supremely static sin of pride, has tended toward a perverse discouragement of the process of transforming before it even begins. It emphasizes man's sinfulness, but in implying that it is metaphysically unnecessary, it always leaves us with an unwarranted sense of disdain, ruefulness, a secret resentment of God and man that they should have let things "get away" from the original goodness. Publicly, this neo-orthodox view confesses, as did Augustine and traditional Christianity, that it is all a "paradox," an incomprehensible mystery, why omnipotently good (i.e., statically, Greekly perfect) God should ever have got Himself involved in such a mess. This view ends by covertly despising man, ridiculing him for his gratuitous evil.

But the Quaker promise of perfection in the end also leaves the transforming itself without essential significance. If you grant that final unchanging perfection is possible at all, you then can never get rid of the question why omnipotent, good God didn't make it at once, in the beginning. But the modern mind has begun to see that the dream of perfection at

either beginning or end has no factual locus, at least in experience. It behooves religion therefore to supply a meaning for these facts. It cannot continue to consider as the only real content of belief that "someday the repair of God's botched creation will be finished."

Only a religion that understands eternal, dynamic, creative, redemptive process as the eternal *intent* of God can hope to undercut modern cynicism, and thence be effective in our disintegrating world. Such an understanding requires for its ultimate foundation a dynamic idea of goodness or value. *No other idea will do for the modern theodical task.* It means that goodness can exist, can be embodied by any god, only as the very feeling of organizing, resolving process while it is in the act of taking place. And if good can only be known as felt in such process, then there must forever be problems, imperfections, difficulties, maladjustments to be resolved; there must forever be aspiration, search, effort, strategy; there must forever be partial resolution, salvation, redemption. If need and resolving process were ever to be completely overcome (by perfection) there would be no good any more. Once and for all you've got to be able to tell the scoffing ones that evil and problem, which evolving, experiencing creatures must engage, are not anomalous interferences, lapses from God's original intention, but are precisely His meaningful intention — not a temporary intention either, but an eternal intention, necessary as long as good is to exist. Only the dynamic idea of good permits this assertion.

In the remainder of this paper I will suggest some aspects of both humanism and Christian theism that a thorough acceptance of dynamism would imply, thus furthering a rapprochement between them. Here the suggestions can be hardly more than hints. A fuller treatment can be found in my book, *Is Reality Meaningful?*, Philosophical Library, 1966.

1. *Cosmic divine purpose.* Modern field theory can be argued as supporting the purposiveness of all energy, the possibility of the universe as a unified field or whole with some purposive regulation of its parts, the relevance of all reality to human existence. There is enough implication of cosmic pur-

pose, at any rate, so that humanists have no right to exclude any consideration of the cosmic dimension.

2. *Mystical experience of God.* Field energy theory is at least harmonious enough with the idea of cosmic consciousness so that again there are no grounds for rejection of knowledge at this level out of hand. Questions about the "objective correlate" may remain, but there is no need of a humanist interdict on Quakerism's mystical emphasis.

3. *Original perfection of creation or of man seems negated.* If good exists only in transformation, God must have created the need of transformation. This opposes both orthodox innocence of Adam and humanist-Rousseauian "natural, original goodness" of man.

4. *But dynamic theology, though rejecting original perfection, does not have to reject a certain interpretation of fall and sin.* All of human evil, that is, does not have to be blamed on God. Man's fall and sin would be his refusal to enter upon the transformation or salvation process, his choice to remain in the original, God-given imperfection. This imperfection would then *become* man's own fault because he has now chosen it. His further inevitable regression and consequent worsening would not have to be blamed on God. It would partly be God's attempt to stimulate him into creative growth, partly deserved punishment for being static. Pride as the arch-sin (refusal to change), humility as the arch-virtue (readiness to change) would fit well into this approach.

5. *Transformation or salvation of man would be supported,* as against any humanist over-confidence in man's already existent goodness and power. Divine aid in this process would not be precluded. Humanists may argue that man can save himself, but they would be unjustified in any dogmatic rejection of theist-Christological claims that it requires divine aid. However, both views would have to stop thinking in terms of "return to essence," "recovery of man's true self," or even "potential goodness," if this is interpreted to mean a goodness that is somehow already fully present underneath. It can only be a goodness that is truly created now, existentially. And creation *means* creation in the dynamic logic; it does not mean return, nor uncovering what is already there. It means a God

who is really doing something *now*, not one who did it at the beginning, and is merely duplicating His act now. In real creativity we do not just copy a blueprint; that is mere fatalism.

6. *Divine foreknowledge and predestination seem negated* by the concept of genuine creative solving of present problems. For existence to be merely an unrolling of something already existent in God's mind becomes a rather flat, childish idea as compared with authentic adventurous coping with actual problems, both for God and man.

7. *Christology*. The dynamic approach would obviously support Quakerism's maximum emphasis on the present living Christ, the Inner Light of continuing revelation, the presently acting Holy Spirit. Canby Jones' phrases in his review of Lewis Benson: "redemption," "constant re-creation by Christ," "the constantly renewed Christ event," would be consonant unless we suspect all those "re-" words of meaning only repetition of something already done, or restoration to what once was, rather than real solving work being done right now.

The dynamic metaphysics, as process theologians are more and more boldly pointing out, is clearly required for understanding the Old Testament God who constantly tackles emergencies, changes His strategy (the Noah story), revises His plans, responds to prayer. The Greek foundation always made these things incomprehensible. The New Testament in the main continues to illustrate a continuously acting, modifying God, the Christ event being the greatest illustration.

There is an implication from dynamism to the preeminent reality of the *concrete*, which provides an avenue Christologists could justifiably ask humanists to take more seriously, over to accepting particular concrete events in history as conceivably God's central concern, rather than the scientific abstractions humanists are tempted to worship instead. On the other hand, humanists could ask Christologists to guard against letting wrangling over shades of opinion about what happened in poorly recorded times of long ago become of more concern than present life for religion; and to permit modes of expression which reveal enriching parallels between modern experience and science and the traditional terms.

8. Lewis Benson's and Canby Jones' labeling man's chief relationship to Christ by the term "obedience" gives opportunity for a short sample discussion of how the dynamic criterion might affect our decisions on terminology. "Obedience" would, at first sight, be suspect for suggesting static conformity to a given model as the main content of religion. Of course, if it may be allowed to mean obedience to God's intention that we enter effortfully into the creative search and transformation, all right. If it means obedience to a preestablished fixed code of rules supposedly ordered priorly by God or Christ, we would suspect it again, as Paul did. But if you mean by the priorly ordered rule, the law of love, and mean by that the intention to seek fresh solutions to specific problems of human need and relationship, all right again. Yet the word so strongly connotes conformity to fixed commands, that I can't quite accept it as a key word in our religion. Nor does it seem well calculated to recommend our message to the modern minds we should be trying to attract.

This last point goes triply for Canby Jones' phrase, "Lamb's War," against which he knows I have been conducting a vendetta for some time. With shepherding being the minute part of today's culture that it is, it does not seem that to make Quakerism widely understood today one should stress such a remote symbol, particularly since half of it contradicts, at first sight, one of Quakerism's most distinctive emphases. How quaint, how square it must sound to the generation we would like to win.

9. *Faith and hope* would obviously be central virtues for dynamism as the bases of aspirational effort.

10. *Final perfection*, final disappearance of all problem and evil, seems negated by the dynamic idea of good, as discussed above. And does promising that "all evils will be overcome" really do any good for a modern religion? Does a mature mind want to indulge any more in this kind of talk, two thousand years after the first promise of the end? Does it shift the religious quest too much over into the unreal? Of course if we mean that the evils and problems that will eternally appear can each in principle be creatively solved, there would be no objection.

For Quakerism, then, to be the catholic vanguard, it seems abundantly clear that it would have to be the first religion that thoroughly incorporated the dynamic world-view, and stood for these strikingly orthodox conclusions as well as the unorthodox ones that stem from it. If Quakerism wants to be today's movement of power, it must not only understand its essential character from past history; but it must be in the forefront with the new consensus which has been emerging now for almost a century in dynamic scientific philosophy. Since Quakerism's central affirmations do have a head start in harmonizing with that science, Quakers should take advantage of it, going even farther than they have in creating an explicit harmony of science and religion.